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# "Our cherished ideals": rural women, activism, and identity in the Midwest, 1950-1990

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**“Our cherished ideals”: rural women, activism, and identity in the Midwest, 1950-1990**

by

**Jenny Barker Devine**

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Agricultural History and Rural Studies

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2008

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## **Dedication**

For Great-Grandma P., who raised chickens so she could go to high school,

and

for Liz, who inspires me every day.

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## **Abstract**

Between 1950 and 1990, American agriculture experienced tremendous changes. New technologies and economic conditions increased production but drastically reduced the number of farm families, and forced many to reconsider definitions of a “family farm.” In order to understand the rural response to these changes, this dissertation, titled, “Our Cherished Ideals”: Rural Women, Activism, and Identity in the Midwest, 1950-1990,” explores women’s roles in agricultural organizations in Iowa, Missouri, and Nebraska in the latter half of the twentieth century, as well as their relationship to changing economic policies, new technologies, and ideas about gender.

In general, rural women in the Midwest defended the family farm ideal, and they shared an identity rooted in agriculture. They expressed this identity through memberships in organizations, both conservative and radical. Rural women rarely utilized feminist rhetoric to achieve their goals, but rather they declared that they shared an equal stake in the farming enterprise with men. A study of various organizations, including the Farm Bureau, Home Economics Extension clubs, the National Farmer’s Organization (NFO), the Iowa Porkettes, and Women Involved in Farm Economics (WIFE), illustrates that women shared an identity shaped by their relationships to agriculture, considered themselves imperative to farming operations, and consistently utilized social networks to strengthen changing rural communities.



## Introduction

“For it is a grim but bracing truth that we must constantly re-vitalize and re-create our cherished ideals.”

*Mrs. Herbert Johnson, Chairwoman of the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation Women’s Committee, 1969*

In April 1970, the *Farm Journal* published a letter from Helen Karnes, an Arkansas farm woman. Karnes wondered, “Has anyone ever noticed the treatment women get from farm organizations?” Rarely did women serve on boards, while men assumed that women wanted to watch fashion shows or have “‘girl talk’ rather than listen in on meetings intended to improve our farming.” Because most of the women she knew acted as “partners” on the farm with their husbands, she wanted to know why more women were not present at meetings. Karnes concluded, “There’s no law that says we can’t walk in – but it would be nice to feel welcome.”

The editors of the *Farm Journal* responded to Karnes’ letter with great interest, and asked readers whether they really believed that men overlooked women in farm organizations. The editors encouraged readers to write in by posing two questions, “Are women themselves in part responsible? Or are farmers more conservative in giving women their due than men in other organizations?” The editors even offered to pay for any letters they published. Few, if any women responded. Over the following year, not one letter on the topic appeared in the *Farm Journal*. The topic, like the women in agricultural organizations, had become invisible.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Karnes, “No Welcome Mat for Women,” *Farm Journal* (April 1970), 72.

In recent scholarship concerning the lives of rural American women there are numerous references to the “invisibility,” of women’s contributions to the farm, the family economy, rural communities. They were “silent” workers, simply doing women’s work that seemed routine and insignificant, hardly worthy of serious academic study. Certainly, in the last twenty-five years, several scholars have remedied this invisibility, giving the experiences of rural women a more central position in the broader debates in American women’s history. In studying the history of rural America, historians have found that women played a significant role in the rural economy, exercised considerable power within families, and shaped their communities through civic, religious, and agricultural organizations. Still, some elements of rural women’s invisibility remain, particularly in studies of agriculture during the decades following the Second World War. During these years, as new technologies allowed fewer farmers to cultivate more acres, young people migrated to the cities, rural communities fell into decline, and farm families increasingly became aware that they were a minority in American society. It was during this period that many rural residents found their neighborhoods dwindling, and their towns less viable. In examining this period, scholars have primarily examined those who were displaced, or found changing economic conditions disrupted their expectations. As farming became a capital-intensive business, more women worked off the farm, fewer appeared to be involved in raising poultry and livestock, even less were directly involved in cultivation, and such new technologies as household appliances, automobiles, and computers transformed their traditional roles. Women appeared to lose their role as agricultural producers and, as many scholars have argued, without a direct connection to the farm these women also lost their agricultural identity.

This view of events during the latter half of the twentieth century, however, discounts the fact that many of the values and beliefs ingrained in rural America transcended technology and commercialism. Rather than retreating from agribusiness and commercial agriculture, rural women expressed the need for greater community bonds and local pride, and this compelled many women to learn about agricultural issues, to act on behalf of their communities, and to establish strong leadership and educational networks. At the same time, rural women also began to question their status in rural society. For the most part, they still believed that the term “farmer” implied a male, head-of-household, and that they, as women, were “farm wives.” Over time, though they did not necessarily question differences between men and women, they began to demand attention from federal, state, and local officials as activists and as experienced agricultural workers. They believed that their work in supporting roles was imperative to maintaining the status of agriculture in an increasingly urban and industrialized society. In 1980, a survey of American farm women found that 74 percent were involved in some sort of community activity, whether it was with a church, the PTA, a political party, a service club, or an agricultural organization. These organizations provided an important social outlet for women, whose rural communities had changed dramatically over the course of the twentieth century, and their memberships allowed them to express their political, social, economic, and gendered identities. Agricultural organizations, in particular, offered women their own voice in an occupation and way of life traditionally dominated by men. This dissertation considers the formation, membership composition, tactical approach, rhetoric, and relevant political, social, and economic issues associated with rural women’s agricultural organizations in Iowa, Nebraska, and Missouri between 1950 and the late 1980s. These rural women who joined organizations shared a common identity based

on their connections to agriculture, and they often based their involvement on their desire to improve not only their local communities, but the condition of agriculture as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this dissertation is not to provide institutional histories of specific organizations, nor to address such women's groups unrelated to agriculture and rural living, as literary societies, friendship clubs, or religious and church-sponsored organizations. To include these would force this study oversimplify its analysis of rural women. By focusing on agriculture, it will enable the study to focus on more specific examples, to illustrate the options available to women interested in agricultural activism, and to show how those options changed over time. Overall, this is the story of several transitions in the countryside, for women and for farm families. This was a period of rapid change for American agriculture, as rural families expected higher standards of living, new technologies increased production, and farming became a capital-intensive, specialized business. Many farm families found these changes unsettling, as small farms and rural communities seemed to disappear. In 1900, approximately 40 percent of the American population lived on farms. By 1950, this number declined to 17 percent and, by 1990, only 2 percent called the farm home. In the ten years between 1960 and 1970 alone, the farm population fell from 15.6 million to 8 million. Neighborhoods lost families and, as farms increased in size, so too did the distance between farm homes. Women connected to agriculture as wives and daughters, whose identities had been shaped by life on the farm, found these changes very troubling. For generations, they had depended upon such informal support networks and community institutions as schools and churches. Therefore, this dissertation will use organizational

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<sup>2</sup> Rachel Ann Rosenfeld, *Farm Women: Work, Farm, and Family in the United States* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 193, 196-198.

records as a means to show how rural residents, and specifically women, perceived their choices and opportunities within the context of a changing American society.<sup>3</sup>

In many ways the conservative nature of rural women's activism throughout the twentieth century does not seem to fit the common definition of an "activist" group. This has troubled many women's historians, who have found that across the nation, both rural and urban women's organizations were in a state of transition in the years following the Second World War. This period was very similar to that following the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, women's suffrage, in 1920. By the mid-1980s, several historians had taken great pains to illustrate how women's activism not only flourished, but remained energetic and effective, even as the major women's political organizations appeared to splinter into various factions. Having achieved the vote, but still unable to gain elected offices, women took an even greater interest in voluntary organizations that addressed such specific issues as pacifism, children, health and nutrition, industrial safety, and organized labor. In general, women found that through voluntary organizations, they could promote education, political lobbying, and publicity as a means to institute political change. In recent years, an increasing body of scholarship has also revisited the years following the Second World War, more often characterized as a conservative period, when Americans seeking greater security in an uncertain world sought to strengthen traditional family structures and strict gender roles. Women, according to this common account, retreated into suburbia where they found themselves frustrated and discouraged, having lost any progress made during the war, when they served the country in the military and as industrial workers. These years, therefore, were

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<sup>3</sup> Sarah Elbert, "Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures," in *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures*, ed. Wava G. Haney and Jane B. Knowles (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1988), 246-249.

devoid of any female activism. Women essentially remained dormant until the emergence of Second Wave feminism with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, in 1963.<sup>4</sup>

Historian Marie Anne LaBerge argued that, by the late twentieth century, this popular myth gained legitimacy because “for some historians, the lack of marches, rallies, or other militant actions, combined with a narrow definition of the ‘women’s movement’ to include only women active for women’s rights or ‘feminists’ has resulted in only a small band of women seeming to be ‘politically active.’” LaBerge argued that women activists in the years after Second World War were neither “leftists” nor “self-denied feminists,” and scholars needed to broaden their scope and include the millions of women who were involved in the civil rights movement, in service groups, and in organizations that addressed recreational interests, professional advancement, peace and human rights, the environment, and nonpartisan politics.

In fact, in 1955, the United States Department of Commerce reported that there were 115 female-only organizations, with a total membership of 35 million. The majority of women who claimed membership were “housewives, business, and professional women between the ages of 20 and 50 years of age – the busiest period of life for wives, mothers, and community women.” Furthermore, these women demonstrated a strong commitment to their organizations, with more than half reporting at least three hours of service per week. Further support for women’s activism can be found in the work of historians including Susan

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<sup>4</sup> For more on women’s activism during the inter-war period, see: Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Roby Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1991); Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Susan Ware, *Partner and I : Molly Dewson, Feminism, and New Deal Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

Lynn, Joanne Meyerowitz, Susan Hartmann, Leila Rupp, Verta Taylor, and Sara Evans who found that, while a distinct “feminist” movement did not appear to gain much momentum during the 1950s, women’s activism in civil rights, the environment, organized labor, and the peace movement actually thrived. Furthermore, these scholars asserted that women’s involvement in grass-roots organizations, or movements for civil rights and peace, helped to raise awareness of inequalities facing women and to foster the growth of Second Wave feminism. As women increasingly found themselves ineffective when facing specific issues, they eventually came to believe that ideas of gender and limitations placed on women needed to change. In her study of women’s work for racial justice and peace activism, Lynn wrote, that women’s activities during the 1940s and 1950s “represented a watershed in women’s social reform activism, one that ultimately led to more general challenges to discrimination based on race and gender in U.S. society during the 1960s.” Lynn used the image of a bridge to illustrate how women “linked the prewar progressive work of women reformers with women’s activism in the civil rights, antiwar, and feminist movements.”<sup>5</sup>

Rural women’s activism in the decades following the Second World War was very much like that of urban women, described by the above scholars. It was not isolated and followed greater national efforts to secure a prosperous future for agriculture. Even before the end of the Second World War, members of Congress, federal and state agencies, and

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<sup>5</sup> Marie Anne LaBerge, “Seeking a Place to Stand: Political Power and Activism Among Wisconsin Women, 1945-1963,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1995), 1-30; Susan Lynn, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times: Racial Justice, Peace, and Feminism, 1945 to the 1960s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 3-5; see also Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Susan M. Hartmann, *From Margin to Mainstream: American Women and Politics Since 1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women’s Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Sara M. Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Knopf, 1979).

agricultural organizations engaged in debates over price supports, which developed out of New Deal policies in the 1930s, and dramatically increased the average farm income during the war. By 1950, the average farm income was \$1,735 per year, four times what it had been a decade earlier. Still, this lagged far behind the overall national average of \$2,900, and farm families called for greater federal action in achieving parity, or fair commodity prices that matched or exceeded the cost of production. Debates centered on limitation of production, soil conservation, increasing consumerism, and federal price supports that, during the war, guaranteed farmers 90 percent parity, but also proved incredibly expensive for the federal government. Following the war, many feared a return to the agricultural depression that beset farm families during the 1920s and 1930s, and they began looking for a solution. Historian Virgil Dean observed that the changes taking place in American agriculture during this period were not simply about technology increasing production, but rather about economics. Underemployment was rampant in the countryside, and many rural Americans persisted in living conditions well below those for urban residents. Furthermore, farmers were unwilling to voluntarily reduce production to increase prices, and thereby turned their attention to better marketing and raising consumer awareness.<sup>6</sup>

The efforts of federal authorities reflected this new emphasis on marketing. In December 1945, the Secretary of Agriculture, Clinton P. Anderson, published an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* entitled “Is the Farmer Heading for Trouble Again?” Anderson was generally optimistic that, with effective marketing, agriculture could thrive in the post-war economy. He endorsed greater consumption in both the international and domestic

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<sup>6</sup> Virgil W. Dean, *An Opportunity Lost: The Truman Administration And the Farm Policy Debate* (Columbia: The University of Missouri Press, 2006), 4-6,



markets, particularly for low-income families. Programs in health and food education, as well as a school lunch program, ensured ready markets for farmers who produced ever increasing surpluses. Such programs appealed to rural women because during the early part of the twentieth century, they had taken the lead in formulating similar educational programs. They most often served as the public relations arm of the leading farm organizations, and with the new emphasis on marketing in the postwar period, their roles would increase in significance.<sup>7</sup>

There was, however, one fundamental difference between the women considered in this study, and the urban women involved in civic and social movements. During the 1950s and 1960s, rural women did not build a bridge. For these rural women, there was no gap, there were no “waves” of activity, and the activism of rural women was based on a desire to improve the status of agriculture, not necessarily to connect with or build on other movements. In other words, historians have asserted that the activities of the urban women worked toward, or evolved into Second Wave feminism. As urban women began to work on issues of race and class, or act on their concerns about the environment or consumer rights, historians have argued that women gained a new awareness of their status of women. As a result, Second Wave feminism emphasized individual rights and presented a challenge to traditional gender roles. The activities of rural women did not. Most of the major agricultural movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries included elements of women’s activism, and they provided a steady, constant opportunity for women members to pursue their political and social interests, and to speak for agriculture. Rural women did not appear to develop a new, feminist consciousness in this time period. Few women took on public

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 26-27; Clinton P. Anderson, “Is the Farmer Heading for Trouble Again?” *Saturday Evening Post* (December 1945), 95-96.

leadership responsibilities in these agricultural movements. Instead, they often worked alongside other women in auxiliaries and other supportive roles, pursuing issues and projects such as home management, poultry, nutrition, food preservation, child rearing, and others relevant to their work on the farm. These roles were not necessarily imposed on women and should not denote subordination to men's organizational work. For centuries, rural women depended on both formal and informal networks for sharing work, trading goods, assistance with child birth and child care, and other emotional, material, and physical needs. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, formal organizations for rural women, complete with established leadership structures, coordinated activities, and membership requirements became increasingly common in the American countryside. Women who joined these groups, however, often transformed their informal neighborhood networks into local chapters of state and national organizations. So women's activism actually developed out of traditional neighborhood and rural family practices, and is best defined by an important concept in the lives of rural women: mutuality.

Over the last few decades, scholars have found that most rural women did not subscribe to the urban notion of separate spheres, or the idea that the work performed by men and women was distinct and independent. While rural women did generally adhere to prescribed gender roles, men and women in the countryside often found greater flexibility in work responsibilities, as well as community endeavors. Rather than working to simply support men in their public endeavors, rural men often credited women's work as essential to the success of the farm. Women's activities growing, preparing, and preserving food, sewing and mending, raising children, raising chickens, and the variety of other tasks they performed were not cursory tasks, but rather work that was vital to the prosperity of the family.

Furthermore, women, particularly on the farm, could perform male tasks without compromising their femininity. Likewise, men viewed women's membership and activity in agricultural organizations as an important component to achieving their social and political goals. Women could therefore declare an interest in farm activism without being seen as unusual, "strong-minded," or disruptive. In fact, most women throughout this study preferred to endorse gradual change through education and the political process. Even those involved with the seemingly more radical groups tended to hold strong beliefs in the integrity of the American political system, and they never called for massive social or political revolutions, only more equitable distributions of wealth. Therefore, throughout this dissertation, the term "activism" will be applied any time women came together for the common purpose of improving their homes, their neighborhoods, their communities, or American agriculture, whether it was through Home Demonstration projects or promoting withholding actions.

This work draws from and builds upon a growing body of scholarship establishing the importance of organizations and communities in the countryside. In the last fifteen years, historians Mary Neth, Katherine Jellison, Nancy Berlage, and others have reconsidered the experiences of farm women in the twentieth century. Neth, for example, described the importance of rural neighborhoods to women's work lives, and how women resisted an invasive social policy that promoted middle-class, urban ideals. Jellison applied similar ideas to the history of technology by studying how farm women welcomed labor-saving devices in the home, but resisted pressures to abandon their rural identities. Finally, Berlage studied women who joined the state Farm Bureaus, wherein women used a complex rhetoric of

partnership that allowed women to sometimes declare equality between the sexes, while at other times to exploit their unique authority over the business of the home.<sup>8</sup>

This dissertation applies similar ideas to women's organizations during the latter half of the twentieth century, and explores how women acted to preserve rural communities, schools, neighborhoods, and family farms. Several scholars, including those mentioned above, have argued that after the Second World War, farm women were also become less involved in the agricultural arena. Whereas previous generations of women made a significant cash income from dairy and poultry operations, these became increasingly mechanized after 1950 and women lost their roles as farm producers. More and more, women left the farm to find work in town and they became removed from the cultivation of crops and the raising of livestock. In addition, the introduction of labor-saving equipment, like refrigerators, washing machines, electric stoves and irons, dishwashers, and microwaves, greatly reduced the time required for household tasks. This greatly devalued women's work, made them less likely to be partners in the family farm, and amplified the masculine connotations associated with agriculture. Extension publications, popular periodicals, and federal programs insisted that farm women become more like leisurely urban housewives, with few cares for their husband's occupations. Most farm women resisted these changes, and did not readily abandon their rural identities. This study will argue that rather than feeling marginalized by the commercialization of agriculture the depopulation of the

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<sup>8</sup> Mary Neth, "Building the Base: Farm Women and the Rural Community and Farm Organizations in the Midwest, 1900-1940," in *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures*, ed. Wava G. Haney and Jane B. Knowles (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1988), 339-355; Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Nancy K. Berlage, "Organizing the Farm Bureau: Family Community, and Professionals, 1914-1928," *Agricultural History* 75, no. 4 (2001), 406-437.

countryside, women resisted these changes by joining organizations to improve their quality of life and to speak for farm families.

Geographically, this dissertation examines organizations that operated in three Midwestern states: Iowa, Missouri, and Nebraska. For the purposes of this study, the Midwest is defined as the twelve-state region that includes Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota. The three states selected for closer examination: Iowa, Missouri, and Nebraska, not only exemplify Midwestern society and agriculture, but also represent examples of the diversity within the entire region. For example, agriculture and rural life in Iowa are characteristic of the prairies and the corn belt, while Missouri provides an example of a state shaped by the presence major cities and industrial centers, as well as a Southern heritage, and Nebraska offers an examination of conditions on the Great Plains, where rural families tend to be more remote and isolated. Again, the purpose of this dissertation is to consider how women's options for activism changed over time, but also across space, and by studying three distinct states within the same region, it will be possible to better analyze how agriculture practices, economic class, farm size, environment, and geography shaped how women perceived their own opportunities.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The women included in this study are primarily white, native born women of European descent. I have chosen not to include African American women's clubs in this study primarily because they did not maintain a strong presence in the states included in this study. There were very few, if any, African American farm women's clubs in rural Iowa and Nebraska. In Missouri, where the Extension Service segregated its programs, memberships in African American women's clubs were also dwindling. More importantly, Missouri's clubs were located primarily in the southernmost boot heel region, where the agricultural economy was dominated by cotton growers and the sharecropping system. This makes the region perhaps more Southern than Midwestern. In 1960, the seven remaining African American women's clubs in Missouri were located in boot heel counties, and there they often made up the majority of Extension Club members in that local area. Overall, however, rural African American clubwomen comprised a disproportionate number of members. After 1940, the number of women in clubs never exceeded 807 members, while overall membership ranged between 32-47,000 women across the state. In 1960, 611 African American women belonged to Extension Clubs,

In her comparative study of women on the prairies and the plains during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, historian Glenda Riley found more similarities than differences between women in the two regions. Gender, more than social class, occupation, ethnicity, and location, shaped the lives of Midwestern women and their views of family, work, and community activities. She argued that even though women on the Great Plains tended to be more isolated, and quite often politically active due to more liberal suffrage laws, their lives were still very much governed by gendered expectations and domestic responsibilities. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this study, it will be important to examine statistics for population, farm size, and prosperity in order to better understand how these factors affected women's choices.<sup>10</sup>

In many ways, Iowa, Nebraska, and Missouri share many common Midwestern characteristics. All three states depended heavily on an agricultural economy, and shared rural populations that were primarily white, native-born Americans of northern European descent. Westward expansion, the railroads, the growth of small towns, and the development of commercial agriculture shaped each state. In general, the populations were educated. According to the 1950 Census, residents of Iowa and Nebraska over the age of 25 had attended school for an average of 9 years. In Missouri, the rate was only slightly lower at 8.5

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compared to 33,200 white women. See "Membership Records," in Missouri Extension Homemakers Association Council and Club Records, WUNP 4319, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, MO.

Furthermore, several scholars have clearly demonstrated the unique nature of African American organizations in the countryside, as well as varied cultural practices, and these groups' strained relationships with state and federal agencies. Therefore, to include African American women's clubs and characterize them as identical to those for white women would trivialize the important issues of culture, race, class, prejudice, and power that clearly need direct attention. For more on African Americans and agricultural organizations, particularly Extension work, see Melissa Walker, "Home Extension Work Among African American Farm Women in Eastern Tennessee," *Agricultural History* 70, no. 3 (1996), 487-502; Earl W. Crosby, "Limited Success Against Long Odds: The Black County Agent," *Agricultural History* 57, no. 3 (1983), 277-288. For comparative purposes and a further discussions of Latina women, see Joan M. Jensen, "Crossing Ethnic Barriers in the Southwest: Women's Agricultural Extension Education, 1914-1940," *Agricultural History* 60, no. 2 (1986), 169-181.

<sup>10</sup> Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1988), 198.

years. And even for non-farmers, agriculture was still an important part of the regional economy. Most of the lands in these states were designated as farm lands, with 95.5 percent of the acres in Iowa, 79.3 percent in Missouri, and 96.7 in Nebraska. Furthermore, most residents of Iowa and Nebraska still lived in the countryside, 52.3% and 53.1% of the population living in rural areas, respectively. Likewise, 29.9% of Iowans and 29.1% of Nebraskans lived on farms. Missouri, because of the large populations in Kansas City and St. Louis, had just 38.5% of its residents living in rural areas, and 21.8% living on farms.

Farms and farming practices, however, varied significantly throughout these states. In Iowa, farm size averaged 168.7 acres, while in Missouri farm size averaged 152.7 acres. Each state was home to more than 200,000 farms, which was much higher than the 107,183 farms located in Nebraska. With its large wheat-growing and ranching operations, however, farms in Nebraska averaged 442.9 acres. Levels of prosperity were also quite diverse. In 1950, the value of all farm products sold in Iowa reached \$1,635,350,000 while Missouri's farm products were valued at \$719,878,000 and Nebraska's farm products were valued at \$779,521,000. In order to determine more exact variations in the standards of living, more telling statistics may be the value of farm land and buildings. In Iowa and Nebraska, for example, the average farm had land and buildings valued between \$26,000 and \$28,000, whereas in Missouri, the average farm had land and buildings worth just \$9,776. This is indicative of the fact that Iowa farms were similar in size to those in Missouri, but significantly more profitable. Furthermore, these numbers show that farmers in Nebraska made considerable investments in labor-saving machinery and land. In fact, 81.7 percent of Nebraska farms had at least one tractor, while in Iowa the number was slightly lower at 79.4

percent, and in Missouri, where draft power was still preferred, only 43.6 percent of farmers used tractors.

Most telling are the numbers of farms with access to modern conveniences and new technologies. In 1950, 90.9 percent of all farms in Iowa had electricity, compared to just 77.7 percent in Nebraska, and 69 percent in Missouri. Likewise, 84.1 percent of farm homes in Iowa had electric washing machines, while only 66.2 percent in Nebraska and 54.7% in Missouri enjoyed the same convenience. Communication in Iowa was also better developed, with 84.1 percent of farm homes having telephones, compared to 64.8 percent in Nebraska, and 46.4 percent in Missouri. Finally, and perhaps most important to this dissertation is the availability of transportation. It was this factor that often determined whether women could go to meetings and events, or be involved outside of their immediate neighborhood. In 1950, less than 18 percent of all farms in these three states enjoyed a location served by a hard surface road; 63 percent of farms in Iowa, 48.1 percent in Missouri, and 42.5 percent in Nebraska were located on gravel, shell, or shale roads, with high numbers also reliant on dirt and unimproved roads. Equally important was access to automobiles. In 1950, 89 percent of all farms in Iowa and 88 percent of all farms in Nebraska had at least one automobile, while only 62.8 percent of farms in Missouri had automobiles.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> All data from *Census of the Population: 1950, Volume II: Characteristics of the Population, Part 15: Iowa* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952); *Census of the Population: 1950, Volume II: Characteristics of the Population, Part 25: Missouri* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952); *Census of the Population: 1950, Volume II: Characteristics of the Population, Part 27: Nebraska* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952); *United States Census of Agriculture 1950, Volume I, Part 9: Iowa* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952); *United States Census of Agriculture 1950, Volume I, Part 10: Missouri* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952); *United States Census of Agriculture 1950, Volume I, Part 12: Nebraska* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952).



These statistics for population, farm size, and prosperity are crucial to understanding women's motivations, as well as the resources at their disposal. These factors often shaped how women formed their groups, selected strategies, and established the regularity of their meetings. For example, in the early chapters of this dissertation, it will become apparent that women in Iowa were better able to take advantage of Extension programs because of good roads, close neighborhoods, the presence of paid Home Demonstration Agents, the greater likelihood that these women enjoyed modern conveniences, and a desire for a more "middle class" standard of living. In Nebraska and Missouri, on the other hand, a lack of funding and particularly in Nebraska, distance, stunted the growth of local women's clubs until the late 1920s and early 1930s. Even then, women often had to use creative strategies for organizing lessons and clubs without the assistance of Home Demonstration Agents.

As the decades wore on, the presence of communication technologies, proximity to neighbors and towns, and the prosperity of farm families continued to play a role in women's choices. As rural populations declined, women became spokespersons for farm families and took on the duty of consumer education so that urban residents would better appreciate the contributions of farmers. In many cases, women relied on telephones to organize members, and technologies such as copiers and mimeograph machines to create materials for meetings. By the 1970s, some women's groups became more and more interested in national trends and federal policies, making transportation, communication, and access to information even more imperative. By then, better roads, automobiles, telephones, radios, and television made a political lobbying organization such as Women In Farm Economics (WIFE), feasible on the Great Plains.

Despite any variations between Iowa, Missouri, and Nebraska, farm families in these states faced the same challenges in the second half of the twentieth century. During the post-war years each of these states witnessed a declining rural population. In general, fewer families farmed as those who stayed purchased more land to justify the adoption of new, expensive technologies. Furthermore, the rural populations in these states were beginning to age, and over the next few decades, the average farm grew larger, the average farmer grew older, and the average small town faced a declining population. Regardless of whether they were on the prairies, plains, or elsewhere, or whether they were ranchers or farmers, many rural women in the Midwest responded to these changing conditions by joining organizations to address their concerns.

In addition to material concerns, it is also imperative to ask *why* exactly some women chose to become involved with organizations, whether it was to socialize, to develop new practical skills, to gain professional and leadership experience, to become politically involved, to spend time with other family members, or simply to fill spare time. Theoretically, this dissertation will emphasize women's personal motivations, the nature of farm women's gendered identities, and women's changing relationships to feminism. It will focus on an important shift away from a general organizational emphasis on the home and domestic duties, to women's organizations that cast women in a different light: as farmers, as producers, as political activists, as agricultural professionals, and as partners in the farming operation. Theories involving farm women's roles and gendered identities have stirred considerable scholarly debate among social scientists and historians, and farm women's perceptions of gender are often studied but difficult to measure because these women did not work for wages, their work was unregulated, and few ever challenged farm women's roles as

wives. Further complicating the situation is the fact that each family unit was unique, negotiating work and responsibility on individual terms.

The first chapter therefore, will further establish this theoretical framework by discussing the relevant historiography and highlighting the struggles of scholars over the past thirty years to truly define a distinct form of rural feminism. In reassessing the countryside, many scholars have found elements of mutuality between men and women, with each contributing valuable resources and work to the farm. Nonetheless, scholars have also struggled with the fact that women did not enjoy equal opportunities for land ownership and access to resources until very late in the twentieth century, and even then stereotypes and limitations remained. Furthermore, pinpointing one, universal rural woman's experience has proven impossible: conditions for women varied by race and ethnicity, national origin, geographic location, and social class. While women in some families enjoyed considerable financial freedom and the opportunity to select the work they performed, others did not. Some women experienced domestic abuse, economic hardship, and discrimination based on gender, race, and class.

The theoretical framework for this dissertation then does not attempt to clearly define a general rural woman's experience. Instead, it is based on the idea of mutuality, or that both men and women made valuable contributions to the farm and to farm organizations. And even as women, by the end of the twentieth century began to use the rhetoric of equality, they still believed strongly in the mutual cooperation of women and men. This concept may also be defined in terms of "relational feminism," as opposed to the Second Wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s that emphasized a woman's individual rights to political, economic, social, and legal equality with men. Traditionally, the feminist methodology is a conglomeration of

research philosophies and analytical techniques that emphasize the shared experiences of women. A feminist approach requires scholars to be aware of power structures, inequalities, individual agency, and the nature of socially constructed gender roles. This study will draw from feminist methodologies, yet it will also be careful to place rural women in their proper context, in relation to their husbands, their families, and their connections to agriculture.

Rural women, in general, did not seek legal or economic equality with their husbands, and they did not express any desire to do so through their organizations. This would have been counter to tradition and family arrangements in the countryside. Instead, they possessed a “relational feminism” through which they sought power over resources and the ability to bring about change by relating their activism to everyday experiences as mothers, as farm workers, and as members of the agricultural community. This allowed farm women to justify their activities by declaring that their work through organizations was an extension of their function on the farm and in the home.<sup>12</sup>

While these ideologies of mutuality and relational feminism are helpful to this study, they both have limitations in that they do not fully explain individual motivations for women to become active in agricultural organizations. Therefore, the primary focus of the theoretical framework rests on the idea that women joined agricultural organizations because of their personal commitments to their families, their farms, their communities, and the idea of agriculture as a way of life. This adherence to an occupational group, more than gender or mutuality, affected how women selected organizations and formulated their strategies. The study of organizations will illustrate how women came together with one purpose, and it

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<sup>12</sup> For more on the concept of relational feminism, see: Louise I. Carbert, *Agrarian Feminism: The Politics of Ontario Farm Women* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 27-29, 117-146.

allows for a more general analysis of rural women's issues. The records they left behind offer a snapshot into shared values, perceived opportunities and limitations within the agricultural community, and strategies for overcoming those limitations. The records also allow for analysis of the rhetoric and ideals set forth by the women's organizations. First, this study considers the ideals that the women themselves espoused, and how they defined their roles as women and as members of a group. It then considers whether or not the women believed they could actually fulfill their vision, and how they adapted to changing demands within the organizations, within their communities, and within their families.

This theoretical framework also allows for an understanding of how rural women viewed the organizational options available to them at a given time. Members of rural organizations often shaped their activities and selected groups based on their needs as women and as members of a specific rural community or commodity-based group. After 1950, technology significantly changed the amount of work women performed both on the farm and within the home, but this fact did not necessarily lessen their personal interest in agriculture. In fact, as the number of farms declined across the country, keeping a family farm solvent became a paramount concern for many women. Whereas previous generations lamented the exodus of youth to the cities and wondered whether any young people would want to continue farming, many women after 1950 worried whether there would still be a farm to inherit. Therefore, this study will argue that rather than finding themselves marginalized from agriculture, women in the latter half of the twentieth century actually strengthened their ties to agriculture.

The second chapter provides background information on the growth of formal, rural groups designed specifically for women. Between 1900 and 1965, women's clubs truly

became a fixture in Midwestern rural life, and American society as a whole. This period, more than any other, saw the formation and growth of women's groups in both rural and urban areas as women began to pursue social and political reforms. In order to illustrate how specific women's clubs organized, the second chapter focuses on the first thirty years of the Iowa Farm Bureau Women's Committee (IFBFWC) and the development of training schools to disseminate information from the state levels through the county, township, and school district organizations. This case study is useful because the IFBFWC, and clubs sponsored by the Extension Service, were the most popular and common organizations throughout the Midwest. Furthermore, the IFBFWC utilized an organizational model and established communication networks that were common in other states. Though Iowa's Extension service was considerably better funded and more pervasive than that of Nebraska and Missouri, the process of passing information from the state to the local levels was common in all three states.

The focus of the second chapter is primarily on the establishment of leadership networks and the strategies of women leaders to ensure that women's programs received serious attention and funding. In addition to the Extension clubs, however, this chapter will also briefly discuss other options available to women in the early twentieth century, including commodity-based groups such as the Women's Progressive Farmers Association, an auxiliary to the Missouri Farmers Association, as well as the Farmers Union.

By 1950, women's clubs had become standard social and educational institutions in the countryside. Following the Second World War, state and national leaders of rural women's organizations believed that women should be concerned about agricultural prices, soil conservation, international relations and trade, taxes, and related legislation. For many of

the township women's groups in Iowa and Missouri, however, it does not appear that they always shared the ideals of state and national leaders. The third chapter will consider how rural women actually responded to state and national leaders, and how they promoted various issues within their neighborhoods. Records show that local members were actually more interested in traditional women's tasks such as crafts, cooking, sewing, home decoration, and nutrition. This is indicative of the fact that many women wished to maintain traditions and communities by holding on to specific roles, celebrating the time-honored contributions of farm women. By the 1950s, many of these women were older and had been involved with township clubs since the 1920s and 1930s. Many of the younger members were either relatives of older members who joined in order to spend time with friends and family, or they were urban women who married farmers and sought to learn more about the challenges of keeping house in the countryside.

In contrast, the fourth chapter is based on oral histories of women who participated in the National Farmer's Organization (NFO), and examines a different type of group that offered women an opportunity to preserve traditional values while working on a new marketing system, based on collective bargaining, for farmers. Founded in 1955, in Corning, Iowa, the NFO protested low commodity prices and the rising cost of production. The organization spread quickly across the Midwest, and though it was considered by many farmers and politicians to be highly radical, members of the NFO considered themselves to be typical farmers seeking to maintain family farms. As a result of withholding actions to increase prices, as well as boycotts and protests that included the slaughter of livestock and property damage, the NFO stirred considerable controversy. Though women in the NFO rarely took a direct part in the withholding actions, they attended meetings, worked in

offices, provided support, kept records, raised money, maintained telephone trees, and quite often, ran the family farm when their husbands took on leadership roles. Because few women held leadership positions, very little is known about their role in the organization. Yet this chapter illustrates that not all women were interested in organizations geared toward education and domestic duties, and they desired to bring about immediate social and political change for farm families.

Rural women's activism experienced a shift during the 1960s and 1970s, from an emphasis on farm homemaking to an emphasis on agriculture. This shift coincided with trends toward agricultural specialization. As farmers moved toward specific commodities, commodity-specific organizations increasingly became important social and political outlets in rural communities. The fifth chapter, then, focuses on the Iowa Porkettes, organized in January 1964 as an auxiliary to the Iowa Pork and Swine Producers Association (IPSPA). Following successful organizational models, the Porkettes established chapters at the county and district levels. In 1976, the Porkettes incorporated as an independent organization and created the Iowa Pigskin Sales Company, a fully owned, for-profit company to sell pig-related items. As they developed a professional identity, they questioned the effectiveness of their name, as well as the promotion of Pork Queen contests. This reflects a changing consciousness among farm women, and a desire to be taken seriously as advocates and as agriculturalists.

During this same period, women in western Nebraska formed Women in Farm Economics (WIFE), as a political lobbying group. Within months of organizing, chapters appeared in eleven states and members testified before Congress on the dire economic situation facing American farmers. The sixth chapter traces the early development of WIFE,



and considers how, despite their success and politically aggressive tactics, members of WIFE did not use rhetoric from the second wave feminist movement and worked to distance themselves from radical organizations. Like the Porkettes, the members of WIFE struggled to legitimize their activities. When members wrote letters to politicians, organized local events, or testified before Congress, they justified their political activities using much of the same rhetoric of mutuality and support as the early leaders the IFBFWC. They declared that they were qualified to speak out on behalf of agriculture because they were part of a farm family. Though they themselves, for the most part, were not “farmers,” they were still part of a shrinking rural minority. Many members argued that they needed to be involved because their husbands, who were responsible for working on the farm, did not have the time. Others believed that as farm women, they had unique insight into the problems of agricultural economics and its impact on rural families.

At the same time however, WIFE quickly took on the appearance of a highly professional organization. Lobbying state and federal officials required considerable coordination, while their rallies, fundraisers, conventions, and publications required considerable commitment on the part of members, many of whom had other work and family responsibilities. This ultimately proved intimidating to some members, who either dropped out or wavered in the commitment to WIFE because they did not believe they had the necessary skills to make a viable contribution. The struggles of WIFE to retain members in its early years also highlighted the different experiences of farm women involved with various products, techniques, and commodities, as some members found themselves in conflict over the best course of action for agriculture as a whole. As an organization primarily comprised of western and southern women, members quickly found that ranchers,

dry-land farmers, cotton growers, and others each had different priorities. This also made it difficult to establish new chapters in the Midwest and east, where agricultural priorities were different still.

Throughout American history, farm wives were thought to have few responsibilities beyond child rearing, food preparation, gardening, and housekeeping. Yet in the last few decades, historians have found that many of these farm wives harbored deep connections with agriculture and believed that their work was essential to the success of the family farm. Furthermore, the women in this study lived during a period of tremendous change. Though they maintained traditional values and did not challenge prescribed gender roles, these women conveyed the idea that they supported farm families in the public realm, sharing with men an obligation to act on behalf of agricultural families.

## Chapter 1

### What makes an Activist? Farm Women, “Mutuality,” and American Agriculture

By the end of the twentieth century, the American media marveled at a seemingly new and growing phenomenon: the female farmer. According to the 2002 Agricultural Census, women served as principal operators on 11 percent, or 237,819 of the more than 2.1 million American farms. Of those, 84 percent of the women were full owners and operators, and 52 percent reported farming as their primary occupation. Though the actual numbers of women in agriculture relatively remained low, the porportion of women farmers continued to rise, and Americans took notice. In 1992, just ten years earlier, only 145,156 women were reported to be principal farm operators. By 1997, however, the number reached 209,784, and many journalists could not help but to note that this increase was especially unusual given the fact that in general, over the past two decades, the total number of farms in the United States had declined.<sup>13</sup>

What amazed American journalists more than anything was that fact that these women were engaged in actual farm work: cultivating crops, raising livestock, operating heavy equipment, and managing the business. A 2001 article in the *Omaha World Herald* reported “dramatic” changes throughout Nebraska. The reporter was astonished by fact that the number of women in farming and ranching was not only increasing, but that in Cherry County, Nebraska, in the heart of cattle country, the 91 ranches that women owned and operated averaged 5,800 acres – equal to the average size of those men owned and operated.

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<sup>13</sup> 2002 Census of Agriculture, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, 2004) 2, 50, 56; 1992 Census of Agriculture, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, 1994), 24.

On the other hand, the article was also careful to point out that women who actually farmed were not to be confused with the increasing number of women land owners. Females owned nearly half of the farmland in both Nebraska and Iowa, but this trend was easily explained by the fact that most of these women were the widows and daughters of farmers who rented the land and left the work up to male relatives, neighbors, or tenants. This appeared to be an extremely important distinction in this article and others like it because women living on the land and holding ownership was not unusual. It only became a phenomenon if the women decided to run the farms and ranches themselves.<sup>14</sup>

Despite these growing numbers of women in agriculture, there were still indications that within many farming communities, female farmers were a rarity. Agriculture has traditionally been a masculine profession with connotations of strength, independence, and ingenuity. In recent years, growing numbers of female farm operators have expressed their frustration at not being taken seriously in the agribusiness community, simply because they are women. In 2001, Jacque Trumbull, who operated a 3,200 acre ranch near Stapleton, Nebraska, said that auctioneers at bull sales occasionally ignored her because they “weren’t used to women doing the buying.” In 2006, Nan Bonfils, an owner-operator of an organic farm in Madrid, Iowa, told a reporter, “(Women as farmers) is not how agriculture was in Iowa, and it’s not how most people imagine agriculture to be. To actually give full credit to women as producers, landowners, and decision makers, I think that’s still a challenge in Iowa.” Likewise, April Hemmes, who owned and operated a farm near Hampton, Iowa, said that while she had never been denied a loan, she always had to earn the respect of male

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<sup>14</sup> Bill Hord, “‘Love for the Land’ Has Women Running Farms,” *Omaha World Herald* (8 July 2001).

farmers, bankers, and merchants. She said, “It seems like you have to keep proving yourself. I just take that for granted now.”<sup>15</sup>

For women like Bonfils and Hemmes, agricultural organizations specifically geared toward women offered the support, training, and solidarity they did not find in traditionally male organizations. Hemmes, for example, served as the president of the board of the Iowa Women in Agriculture. She found all-female organizations provided important services for women, and that even women who farmed “thousands and thousands of acres” simply did not feel comfortable going to meetings with men. Founded in 2003, Iowa Women in Agriculture offered a number of services, including in-depth seminars on topics including farm management, agricultural business, marketing, intergenerational communication, and estate planning. Ultimately, the organization’s goal was to provide women in agriculture, whether they were primary operators or workers on family farms, with the information they needed to be successful. As a group, members also hoped to extend friendship and support. Hemmes hoped that the group could help more women establish themselves as farmers and overcome stereotypes that women were not able to do farm work. When asked whether women might face difficulties performing certain tasks, Hemmes simply said, “Corn doesn’t care who plants it, and a cow doesn’t care who feeds it.”<sup>16</sup>

The important question to emerge from all of this is how women in agriculture, by the end of the twentieth century, arrived at this point. After all, women in cultures across the world and over time had traditionally managed the cultivation of food and fiber. In Western cultures, women had been engaged in agriculture for centuries, though more often as self-

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.; Heidi Marttila-Losure, “Farmwork Network: Farm Women Help Each Other Learn and Succeed,” *Facets*, published by the *Ames Tribune* (August 2006), 12-19.

<sup>16</sup> “Anne Fitzgerald, “In Large Part, the Land’s Future is Up to Women,” *Des Moines Register* (17 July 2005); Marttila-Losure, 12-19.

described “helpers,” on farms owned by men. It was only in the 1990s and 2000s, that organizations like Iowa Women in Agriculture officially recognized women as “farmers,” as opposed to “farm wives.” Many of these groups also took a decidedly feminist approach to activism. Stacy Brown, who served as chair of the Women, Food and Agriculture Network, a Midwestern group geared toward women in organic and sustainable agriculture, said that the organization intentionally followed feminist principles by valuing all members’ opinions and finding consensus. Furthermore, these groups officially recognized that women had limited access to land and resources, and that they faced fewer opportunities to head up farming operations. Members demanded that women, as a group, be recognized as professionals on an even footing with men. They were no longer satisfied with the concept of “mutuality,” which depended on separate but equally important gender-defined tasks. Farm women in these organizations sought legal, economic, and social equality. So again, it is important to ask why this occurred, and why at this moment?<sup>17</sup>

Such vocal and forthright demands for legal, economic, and social equality between men and women on the farm were very new in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. On the other hand, the idea of rural women coming together for support, information, and friendship was a very old one, and throughout American history rural women had found strength in organizations that addressed their specific needs. The groups formed for women to address agricultural policy during the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, tended to rely on funding and support from men, and they generally did not challenge traditional gender roles. Even farm women’s groups formed in

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

the 1970s that did not have a dominant male counterpart still declared that the purpose of their organization was to support male farmers and entire farm families.

For some scholars, it has been tempting to pinpoint the moment of change when women began to take charge of agricultural organizations. The most obvious moment occurred somewhere during the Farm Crisis of the 1980s, a devastating economic downturn that resulted in financial distress and displacement for of thousands of families. Historian Mark Friedberger argued that many men were unable to cope with the crisis, and that their wives, who often shared a legal partnership in the farming operation, had to step in their place. Farm advocacy and activism during the farm crisis had a new, distinct “feminized” character that focused less on confrontation and more on peaceful mediation and conflict resolution. Friedberger wrote, “Farm women and their allies brought a fresh impetus to the difficult task of working through problems that previously were addressed by males meeting behind closed doors.” Though women had long been involved with farming, the economic crisis forced them out of their comfort zone. Women began to organize their communities and neighbors, and they lobbied state and local governments. Friedberger went so far as to say that women’s efforts at establishing local hotlines and support networks reduced acts of violence against bankers and government authorities, and lowered suicide rates. In the aftermath of the crisis, then, women created a new vision of how American agriculture should be: sustainable, economically viable, and decidedly more egalitarian. Others, like historian William Pratt, believed that while the conditions of the 1980s propelled many women into activism, traditional attitudes toward gender and divisions of labor “remained obstacles to women’s full participation in the movement.” Nonetheless, Pratt still argued that

the “women’s movement arrived in rural America in the mid-1980s,” and perhaps began the process of eroding those traditional attitudes.<sup>18</sup>

This study argues that the shift toward women demanding equality in agriculture was not sudden, but rather it occurred as part of a process that unfolded throughout the twentieth century. The primary purpose of this dissertation is to investigate this evolution of rural women’s activism, and the slow movement from the rhetoric of mutuality to demands for equality in the second half of the twentieth century. More specifically, this study defines a distinct shift that occurred in the years after the Second World War, when rural women’s organizations focused less on the home and family, and more on technology, social issues, marketing, consumerism, and agricultural politics. Women increasingly sought recognition as political activists, as producers, and as professionals. They did so, however, not as women seeking greater individual rights, but rather as members of an ever-shrinking agricultural community. Though farm women found themselves to be most effective in all-female organizations, and they utilized the rhetoric of mutuality or “relational feminism,” they became activists not in order to further the rights of women, but out of their desire to improve conditions in the countryside. An examination of the formation, membership composition, tactical approach, rhetoric, and relevant issues associated with rural women’s organizations in Iowa, Nebraska, and Missouri between 1950 and 1990, will reveal the diversity among

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<sup>18</sup> Mark Friedberger, “Women Advocates in the Iowa Farm Crisis of the 1980s,” in *American Rural and Farm Women in Historical Perspective*, ed. Joan M. Jensen and Nancy Grey Osterud (Washington, D.C.: Agricultural History Society, University of California Press, 1994), 224-234; William C. Pratt, “Using History to Make History? Progressive Farm Organizing During the Farm Revolt of the 1980s,” *Annals of Iowa* 55 (Winter 1996), 40-42. See also: Mark Friedberger, *Shake-out: Iowa Farm Families in the 1980s*, (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 112, 82. In this book, Friedberger elaborated on his ideas of women benefiting from the crisis. He wrote: “. . . it was the wife who was able to grow in stature and to discover a new role for herself. For years she had been satisfied with her duties as homemaker and nurturer. Now she became the dominant member of the household and active in community affairs. Without her leadership and support, her husband might have suffered a complete breakdown. The farm crisis that ruined her husband’s career gave his wife a new dimension and meaning.”



women, and how many either resisted or pressed for this change. It also emphasizes shared experiences, and their varied approaches toward activism, as this shift occurred in the Midwest.

Over the decades, farm women recognized that, even though men and women contributed to the farm, they could find greater solidarity with other women. Even agricultural organizations that admitted women members, such as the Grange and the Farm Bureau, recognized the important contributions of both men and women but still segregated members along gendered lines. This segregation was not necessarily imposed upon women, however, because it appeared to grow out of the mutual work environment on family farms. Few women members ever expressed the idea that gender-defined activities devalued their contributions to farm organizations. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, members of women's farm organizations actually promoted the idea that women's work was essential to the success of the family, the farm, and the community, and they did so in a way that emphasized women's unique, feminine, but distinctly rural skills.

On the other hand, women did not attempt to distinguish themselves as entirely separate from men, but rather as complementary partners with whom they worked for a greater good. Farm women, even in the 1970s, usually justified their political activities by stating that they were connected to agriculture through their husbands and their families. While rural women activists throughout the twentieth century upheld the ideal woman as hard working, educated, loyal to her family, a partner on the farm, and active in her community, they generally avoided the rhetoric of individuality and, after the 1960s, Second Wave feminism. They did not question their importance to the farm, but idea that women

should be defined as “farmers,” with equal opportunities, did not appear to be part of their organizational mission.

Before delving into the events that precipitated this shift, however, it is important to first understand both the historiography of rural women and the theoretical foundations of this study. Over the past thirty years, historians have struggled to define a model that adequately explains the experiences of rural women. By the early 1980s, historians began challenging the ideology of “separate spheres,” first proposed in 1966 by historian Barbara Welter as a model for women’s lives that rationalized differences between the sexes, accounted women’s domestic responsibilities, and removed them from the public world of paid labor, politics, and society. Welter took a decidedly negative view of separation and stated that gendered constraints that restricted their activities often frustrated women. Over the next decade, however, the paradigm of “separate spheres” enabled historians to clarify how women interacted with one another, developed a distinct female culture, became politically active in all-female groups, and sometimes challenged gendered limitations. For example, in 1975, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg found that because of their separation from the public world of men, many nineteenth century women formed deep, intense, and intimate bonds that sometimes exceeded their attachments to their husbands.<sup>19</sup>

In 1979, Estelle Freedman introduced a new element of flexibility into the ideology with her essay, “Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870-1930,” in which she argued that women, particularly those active in their

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<sup>19</sup> Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1966), 151-174; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth Century America,” *Signs* 1, no.1 (Autumn 1975), 1-29; For more on the evolution of the separate spheres ideology, see Linda Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (June 1988), 9-39.

communities, actually needed and sought out this separate space. Women's political organizations, trade unions, reform movements, and educational facilities allowed women to thrive because they could control not only their intellectual environment, but also their physical space. Other historians who have applied this particular idea to their studies have found it to be true, particularly in studies of middle-class, urban women's organizations. And Freedman's conclusions are certainly applicable to this study. Throughout this dissertation, it will become clear that rural women consistently found themselves to be more effective as activists if they maintained their own organizations. They also looked to other women for support, sharing work, and friendship. So it would be easy enough to stop there and simply rely on Freedman's expanded interpretation of separate spheres. Yet in many ways, the "separate spheres" paradigm falls short in explaining how women truly negotiated power and resources with men, within their families, and within society at large. It also neglects issues associated with ethnicity, race, and class.<sup>20</sup>

By the mid-1980s, the problems with this model became increasingly clear, and many of the first historians to challenge separate spheres were those who studied minorities, immigrants, the working class, and rural women. Historians including Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Joan Jensen, Nancy Grey Osterud, and Mary Neth found that throughout American history, from the colonial era to the mid-twentieth century, the lives of rural women were highly complex, particularly in their interactions with men. In fact, they argued that scholars could not even begin to understand the lives of rural women without taking their interdependence on men into account. Women were generally engaged in gender-specific

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<sup>20</sup> Estelle Freedman, "Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870-1930," *Feminist Studies* 5 (Fall 1979), 512-529.

tasks and they regularly turned to other women for support, but their work was absolutely essential to success of the household. Because rural women often made significant economic contributions to the family through the construction of clothing and household materials, the cultivation and preservation of food, the weaving of cloth, the oversight of dairy and poultry operations, and countless other tasks, they were legally and socially subordinate to men, but often enjoyed considerable decision-making power within the family. Gender roles appeared to be more flexible in rural families, particularly when labor was scarce, and this flexibility seemed to cross over into the social and public realm as well. Rural women clearly did not function in a separate sphere from that of men; in fact, these scholars took a decidedly negative view of “separate spheres” and argued that this was an urban, middle class ideology often imposed on farm women by political and social reformers unfamiliar with the realities of rural life. Rural women often took steps to resist “separate spheres” by declaring that they possessed an equal stake in the farming enterprise with men. Out of this body of work, then, historians of rural women found that the term “mutuality” best described the interdependent interactions between men and women in the countryside.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Goodwives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1850* (New York: Knopf, 1982); Joan Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750 to 1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Nancy Grey Osterud, *Bonds of Community: The Lives of Women in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). See also: Rosalind Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); and Carol Lasser, “Beyond Separate Spheres: The Power of Public Opinion,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2001), 115-123.

Scholars in various historical disciplines, other than rural history, also challenged the notion of separate spheres. For sources on African American women and Southern women in the ante-bellum period, see Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985). See also Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988). For sources regarding working class and professional women, as well as women’s participation in labor unions, see: Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York, 1982); Carol

More clearly stated, “mutuality” describes how women worked with, cooperated with, and reciprocated with men. They did not simply operate within exclusively female support systems. Rather, in the words of Osterud, women used strategies of mutuality in order to strengthen “the dimensions of sharing in their relations with men.” Likewise, historian Mary Neth found that mutuality offered both men and women a “positive valuation of labor,” with “communal, not hierarchical definitions of worth.” In other words, women gained power by making their work and contributions to the household an essential part of the family economy. In general, farm women defended the value of their work because it not only supported men’s activities in the sense that it freed men to pursue their occupations, but women’s work actually provided the services and capital necessary to the operation of the farm.

Gender and gender roles are at the forefront of this study, especially the ways in which notions of gender affected women’s participation in predominately male organizations focused on a predominately male profession. Yet Osterud argued that women were able to pursue mutual economic and work relationships with men because gender roles are neither rigid nor fixed. Gender is an important social construction because it enables individuals to clearly define individual responsibilities, and is essential to the maintenance of “orderly” heterosexual relationships. At the same time, however, gendered relationships are continually changing according to family structure, necessity, the demands of work, and the expectations of society. Women who lived in rural areas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and

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Groneman and Mary Beth Norton, ed. *To Toil the Livelong Day: America’s Women at Work, 1780-1980* (Ithaca: University of Cornell Press, 1987); Susan Levine, *Labor’s True Woman: Carpet Weavers, Industrialization, and Labor Reform in the Gilded Age* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1984); Nancy Schrom Dye, *As Equals and as Sisters: Feminism, the Labor Movement, and the Women’s Trade Union League of New York* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980); Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

who worked within an interdependent family structures, often found their options for education, land ownership, and occupation limited by notions of women's proper roles. At the same time, women often performed men's work, gained knowledge of agricultural technology, politics, and business as it shaped their daily lives, and found significant value in their own prescribed tasks. Furthermore, girls more often enjoyed educational opportunities because parents did not always consider girls' labor as essential to the farm. These factors are what made "mutuality" a feasible and effective strategy not only within the home, but also within the community. Neth found that women's shared work patterns actually helped develop "habits of mutuality and strategies for economic survival," which rural residents applied in their political and social organizations. Women became imperative in building membership numbers and maintaining a member's sense of community. Neth concluded "while men dominated public and political arenas, the institutions they led were built largely on the structures women created."<sup>22</sup>

In many communities this appeared to be the case, and the idea of "mutuality" appeared to serve women very well in agricultural organizations. Administratively, rural women's organizations were very much separate from those of men. Women and men also addressed distinct, separate issues. Yet women who were members of organizations that welcomed both men and women were always conscious that their mission depended on the cooperation of men and families. During the nineteenth century, for example, the Order of

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<sup>22</sup> Nancy Grey Osterud, "'She Helped Me Hay It as Good as a Man': Relations among Women and Men in an Agricultural Community," in Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton, *"To Toil the Livelong Day": America's Women at Work, 1780-1980* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 87, 91-92; Osterud, *Bonds of Community*, 3-7; Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 217; Mary Neth, "Building the Base: Farm Women, The Rural Community, and Farm Organizations in the Midwest, 1900-1940," in Jane B. Knowles and Wave G. Haney, eds., *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1988), 351.

Patrons of Husbandry, often referred to as the Grange, was among the first agricultural organizations to welcome women as equal members. While it welcomed women into general meetings, it also offered women a ready platform to speak out on issues of interest to women, particularly suffrage and temperance. Despite such rhetoric, historian Donald B. Marti found that women's roles in the organization were not entirely equal to those of men, but more mutual or complementary. Whereas men typically assumed responsibility for the cooperatives, transportation, and agriculture, and women shared in responsibilities for education, membership, and charitable work, by the 1890s, most women in the Grange worked through women's committees. These women's committees were generally dedicated to addressing home economics projects and other domestic issues, but also took on a variety of social, economic, and political issues. This was indicative of the idea that women, as a group, had special interests that were important to the organization, but separate from those of men.<sup>23</sup>

Likewise, Nancy K. Berlage, in her study of women in the Farm Bureau, found that female members created a highly flexible rhetoric that sometimes allowed women to declare equality between the sexes, while at other times allowed women to exploit their unique authority over the business of the family and home. Both male and female Farm Bureau members viewed the division of the sexes within the organization not as subordination into "separate spheres," but as a "symmetry" of relations and "an acknowledgement that the lives of farm men and women intertwined." Though the Farm Bureau did not necessarily offer women equal opportunities to advance within the organization, Berlage argued that by the

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<sup>23</sup> Donald B. Marti, *Women of the Grange: Mutuality and Sisterhood in Rural America, 1866-1920* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 10, 89-102.

end of the 1920s, “it offered women access to new forms of cultural and political authority.” This concept is essential to this study because the rural women who promoted ideas of mutuality and became involved in organizations, harbored strategies different from those of public housekeepers, suffragists, labor activists, or Second Wave feminists. Historians have generally assumed that politically active women sought eventual equality with men and male policy makers. Yet farm women did not. They used the rhetoric of entitlement through association with men, families, and agriculture throughout the twentieth century. For many of these activists, the title of “farm wife,” was a source of pride, and implied a strong, independent spirit. Even though many were outspoken and aggressive organizers, most did not publicly aspire to break into men’s organizations. Over time, and even today, rural women have consistently felt more effective working with other women in all-female organizations.<sup>24</sup>

That women were satisfied and found their strategies to be effective in all-female organizations may best be rationalized as “relational feminism.” Within this framework, women did not act to better their own individual circumstances, or to find greater personal or spiritual fulfillment; their efforts centered on the success of the family and the community, and it required a considerable degree of conformity. By the second half of the twentieth century, farm women, most of whom were actively engaged in the economic order of the family farm, could not relate to the isolation or personal limitations of suburban housewives, epitomized by Betty Friedan’s “the problem that had no name.” As Katherine Jellison has pointed out, women’s motivations for maintaining an identity rooted in agriculture with

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<sup>24</sup> Nancy K. Berlage, “Organizing the Farm Bureau: Family, Community, and Professional, 1914-1928,” *Agricultural History* 75, no. 4 (2001): 406-437.



connotations of hard work and sacrifice, “were complex and had nothing to do with the development of a feminist ideology or any type of organized challenge to patriarchy.” Instead, rural women tended to rely on a rhetoric that placed their work and their activism within the context of the family, the farm, and the community in a way that did not challenge traditional gender roles or emphasize personal accomplishments. In her study of Ontario farm women, political scientist Louise I. Carbert found that “relational feminism” did not necessarily imply a desire for separate spheres, but rather for a justification of women’s participation in politics that did not upset traditional family structures. Carbert pointed out that farm women’s rhetoric did not affect politicians, policy analysts, or agricultural workers, but it did “appease husbands left at home to babysit, suspicious neighbors, and fellow colleagues who begrudge women’s admissions to public office.” In addition, relational feminism provided farm women with a means to articulate “their sincerely held conviction that the standards and practices of domestic life can indeed improve political life and public policy.” It was therefore unnecessary for women to seek legal, political, economic, or social equality with men because to do so would have undermined their mission to organize politically and socially in a patriarchal society.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1963), 15-32; Jellison, 180; Louise I. Carbert, *Agrarian Feminism: The Politics of Ontario Farm Women* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 27-29, 117-146; for an extremely poignant example of women’s dependence on family and community, see Fink, *Open Country, Iowa*, 196. In the course of her study, performed during the early 1980s, Fink described a women’s club meeting during which women discussed their dependence on family resources. Fink wrote, “By not passing the Equal Rights Amendment in 1980 and in other anti-feminist statements they put their faith – and fate – in the hope that family would provide what they needed, or that family would be friendlier to their interests than the legal system would be. If a family failed and a woman needed to find employment, she hoped that a pastor would ask her to work in the church office, or that a discrete inquiry would uncover a part-time job in a school or at the courthouse. The strategy for being favored in this way was to be nice, to get along with people, to be a Republican, and not to talk about unions or women’s rights.”

Certainly, at this point, it is important to acknowledge that not every farm woman enjoyed such mutuality within the home, or found it to be an effective organizational strategy. This study must take into account the unique nature and self-conceptions of women who actually joined and became active within farm organizations, and who eagerly promoted these ideas. Not every farm woman was interested in community activities, whether it was due to family influences, busy schedules, a lack of confidence, or a deficiency of resources. Other women chose to become members of church groups, literary societies, or benevolent organizations – none of which will be considered in this study. That said, it is imperative to discern how activist women were different from those who chose not to become involved. This will help to clarify how the concepts of mutuality and relational feminism should play a role in this particular study, but also the problems of relying exclusively on these ideologies.

Factors that affected women's involvement included age, stage of life, and the prosperity of one's farm, though the overriding characteristic was a woman's belief that membership in an agricultural organization would be of benefit to herself and her family. In 1980, a survey of American farm women found that 74 percent were involved with some type of farm or community organization. This was only slightly lower than the 79 percent of men who reported membership in community and farm groups. Overall, 40 percent of the women surveyed were involved in a general farm organization or an auxiliary to a general farm organization, including the Grange, the Farm Bureau, or the National Farmers Union, while 21 percent belonged to marketing or farm supply cooperatives, and 14 percent belonged to a commodity producers' association, or an auxiliary of a commodity producer's association. Only 2 percent of women surveyed reported membership in an exclusively women's farm organization such as the United Farm Wives, American Agri-Women, or

Women Involved in Farm Economics. In analyzing the membership patterns of husbands and wives, the 1980 survey also found that women were ten times more likely to join farm organizations or auxiliaries if their husbands were also members. These statistics illustrate two very important points: community activities, particularly those related to agriculture, played an important role in the lives of most rural women, and that most women belonged to conservative groups which welcomed both male and female members. This further illustrates the importance and existence of mutuality in the countryside.<sup>26</sup>

More important than a husband's membership, however, the 1980 survey found that the women who were most likely to participate in farm organizations were those at a certain life stage, with considerable legal and economic ties to the farm. These facts imply that there were other aspects, above and beyond their relationships with their husbands and families, that determined who did or did not become active in organizations. This is where we encounter the first problem with "mutuality," because its presence within a household can not necessarily be correlated with community involvement. It was the women who spent most of their lives living in rural areas, and who had their names on land deeds or rental contracts were more likely to be members of farm groups. And these were not necessarily the wives of wealthy, prosperous farmers who simply held incorporated lands. The survey revealed that most of the women and men reporting memberships in community activities, particularly general farm organizations and commodity producers' groups, operated farms that ranged from 300 acres to 999 acres.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Rachel Ann Rosenfeld, *Farm Women: Work, Farm, and Family in the United States* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 193, 196-198.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 186-243.

Another 1997 survey of rural women activists in Iowa and Nebraska revealed more factors that shaped women's participation in agricultural organizations. By interviewing fifteen women who were active members of farm groups, and twelve who had ended their involvement, social worker Julia Kleinschmit Rembert found that life stage, off-farm work, and the desire to contribute to the farm played important roles in women's decisions to take part in organizations, but that these factors also had many gray areas in truly defining who did or did not become active. Those who were no longer active, cited age, as well feeling overwhelmed at the breadth of rural issues, a lack of support from husbands, and most importantly, the demands of off-farm work. Yet these factors were not black and white indicators of who would or would not become active. Most women active in organizations were in their thirties and forties, with children who contributed some work to the farm and provided women with greater free time. By the time they reached their 60s, however, many women believed it was time to pass the torch to new leadership, whether they wanted to or not, simply to keep organizations relevant to farm families.

Furthermore, women approached off-farm work with varied strategies. Many of the women who wished to remain active in organizations actually sought salaried positions in farm and rural advocacy, thereby combining their professional and personal interests. Some of the women who cited off-farm work as a reason they withdrew from activism actually found greater personal satisfaction in their work than they did in activism because their careers provided more "concrete" economic contributions to the family. At the same time, one woman who cited a lack of family support actually admitted that much of the stress was self-imposed. She said, "I had to keep it really good at home so that John couldn't say, 'Look, you're letting things slide here. You've got to do something about it.' So it was a real

pressure.” Nonetheless, this particular woman never indicated whether her husband actually objected to her involvement. Her comments implied that she may have used this rhetoric to articulate her own, personal anxieties about performing her work in the home and garden. These examples illustrate the fact that when discerning the types of women involved in agricultural organizations, it is important to take into account the various implications of off-farm work, age, and family relationships. These are not necessarily black and white indicators, making it difficult to describe the “typical” rural woman activist.<sup>28</sup>

It is clear from these two studies that the women who became involved in organizations were primarily those who maintained ties to the land, and who also believed they had had the power to institute change within their communities and within their own lives. This was clearly articulated by Nancy Grey Osterud, who identified five distinct types of relationships that farm women had with the land which in turn affected their self-perceptions: inheriting daughters, wives of inheriting farmers, daughters of marginal farmers, daughters of displaced farmers, farm partners. The women with the strongest connections to the land were inheriting daughters, since they tended to have not only a strong sense of their family’s ties to a particular place, but they were also firmly entrenched in a particular community, and they “took for granted their ability to actively shape the course of their lives. The wives of inheriting farmers shared this strong tie to the land and a sense of autonomy, but differed slightly in that they took on the aspirations of their husbands and perhaps had a “clearer sense of the demands of interdependence.” The daughters of marginal and displaced farmers, on the other hand, found farming to be insecure and unstable. These women tended

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<sup>28</sup> Julia Kleinschmit Rembert, “Factors Affecting Iowa and Nebraska Farm Women’s Rural and Farm Advocacy Involvement,” (Thesis, Master of Social Work, University of Iowa, 1997), 36-56.

to view themselves as “victims” of circumstances beyond their control, and generally felt a great deal of powerlessness over events in their lives. Finally, farm partners were the women who founded farms with their husbands. These women did not share the same sense of continuity with those who inherited their land, but they developed an acute sense of interdependence with their husbands and family members.<sup>29</sup>

Most of the women who appear in this study will clearly resemble inheriting daughters, wives of inheriting farmers, and farm partners. As a group, they were generally independent women with a shared consciousness that they should act to support the family farm. Furthermore, they tended to have husbands and families who supported their community activities. This presents a problem, however, with the ideology of “mutuality.” As these examples demonstrate, a woman’s sense of agency and her identity were perhaps not entirely dependent on the degree of mutuality within the household, but rather women’s perceptions of farming and their ties to agriculture as a way of life. While this certainly played a role, these examples actually show that a woman’s connection with the family farm and to her devotion the land were paramount in her own self-perceptions.

The second problem associated with “mutuality” as a concept is that for many scholars, discerning its presence within a household appears to depend on the amount and type of work performed by women on the farm. While men remained primarily concerned with the cultivation of crops and the raising of livestock, women’s farm work changed dramatically in the twentieth century. A 1980 survey of American farm women indicated that 97 percent of respondents reported regularly performing the same household tasks that

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<sup>29</sup> Osterud, “Land, Identity, and Agency in the Oral Autobiographies of Farm Women,” in Jane B. Knowles and Wave G. Haney, eds., *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1988), 76-86.

previous generations of women had done, such as cleaning and preparing meals. But by 1980, women enjoyed electric stoves, washing machines, refrigerators, plumbed water, freezers, dishwashers, and other appliances that greatly simplified this work and reduced the amount of physical labor required to perform household chores. Furthermore, women were no longer responsible for the production of dairy and poultry products, or for keeping large gardens and canning the produce for home consumption. Many replaced this work by finding jobs off the farm to supplement the family income or, like 61 percent of the respondents to the 1980 survey, they became responsible for bookkeeping, maintaining records, and running the business aspects of the farm. Few women, however, reported increasing responsibilities for actual farm production. Only 11 percent reported regularly plowing, disking, cultivating, or planning, while 26 percent did so occasionally. A higher percentage, 22 percent regularly participated in the harvest, and the greatest number, 37 percent, regularly cared for livestock. Still, these numbers showed that only a minority of women performed day-to-day manual labor.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Rosenfeld, 56, 57. While modern appliances reduced the amount of physical labor required to perform household tasks, appliances did not necessarily reduce the actual number of hours women spent on housework. One 1965 survey, for example, found that American women, both rural and urban, spent an average of twenty-eight hours per week doing housework, and another twenty-six and a half hours caring for children. Historian Ruth Schwartz Cowan found that these numbers were very similar to those from surveys taken in 1912 and 1935, showing that new appliances did not necessarily provide women with greater leisure time. Cowan also found few discrepancies in the amount of time worked when education and social class were taken into account. According to the 1965 survey, women living on incomes of less than \$4,000 per year spent an average of 452 minutes per day on housework and child care. Women living on incomes greater than \$15,000 per year spent an average of 456 minutes on these tasks. Likewise, education made little difference. Women who graduated from college worked an average of 474 minutes per day, while those who had not completed grade school worked for 453 minutes per day. In light of these statistics and other evidence, Cowan observed that with modernization women became increasingly isolated. Domestic help, delivery services faded by the middle of the twentieth century, while men worked greater distances from the home, and children their days in school and their evenings participating in activities. These factors left women to do much of the housework on their own. Cowan concluded, "The end result is that, although the work is more productive (more services are performed, and more goods are produced, for every hour of work) and less laborious than it used to be, for most housewives it is just as time consuming and just as demanding." For more on the impact of technology on

Some scholars who have examined this phenomenon, of women's labor changing within the farm household, have argued that new technologies actually removed women from their productive roles on the farm. That, in turn, prevented women from pursuing strategies of mutuality because they no longer contributed their labor to the family and the farm. For example, in her study of a rural Iowa county during the early 1980s, anthropologist Deborah Fink chronicled the steady decline in the amount of women's work actually performed on the farm. Egg production, in particular, went from being "women's work to being men's work," as it became highly mechanized and profitable only on a large scale. Whereas previous generations of women relied on their profits from the sale of eggs and poultry products to purchase household goods, clothing, and other necessities, after 1950, egg production became a capital-intensive, industrial process that all but eliminated small, family-owned flocks. As women were "forced" out of the poultry business, Fink concluded that "without her traditional role providing produce and cash for the farm household, a farm woman working on the farm became her husband's helper; the woman as a full partner on a family farm was rarely, if ever, a reality."<sup>31</sup>

Likewise, historian Mary Neth found that by 1940, changes in agricultural production dramatically changed gender-defined work cultures. During the 1920s and 1930s, women celebrated their work and used their contributions to justify their participation in community activities. Over time, however, women began to lose their neighborhoods and social networks, as well as their farm work, and they increasingly found work off the farm to supplement farm income. In doing so they became "supportive farm laborers." She argued

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women's roles within the home, see Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 198-201.

<sup>31</sup> Deborah Fink, *Open Country, Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition, and Change* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986), 135-161.



that women “negotiated for mutuality and respect within the family from a position more removed from agriculture, based on urban wage work or housework, which was the least valued form of women’s labor.” Ultimately, as agriculture became increasingly commercial and profit-driven, women lost the mutual, reciprocal relationships they previously enjoyed with men.<sup>32</sup>

This study, however, finds that these assumptions are not necessarily true. Many women, particularly those who joined organizations after 1950, continued to express a definite connection to the farm, even if their labor was not necessarily required. In their study of the impact of technology on farm women’s economic roles, Lorraine Garkovich and Janet Bokemeier found that scholars had mistakenly assigned value to specific tasks and asked inappropriate questions as to the significance of women’s work. Jobs such as bookkeeping, “helping out” in the fields, “gophering,” and other women’s tasks should not be labeled as unimportant. Rather, they argued that farm families maintained a blurry distinction between “production,” or the business enterprise, and “reproduction,” the family and household. Therefore, Garkovich and Bokemeier argued that scholars should refrain from asking how and why technology devalued farm women’s work. In doing so, they assume that at one point men and women enjoyed true equality and that mechanization “disenfranchised women from

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<sup>32</sup> Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 234-243; see also Corlann Gee Bush, “He Isn’t Half so Cranky as He Used to Be’: Agricultural Mechanization, Comparable Worth, and the Changing Farm Family,” in *To Toil the Livelong Day: America’s Women at Work*, Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton, eds. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 221; and Virginia S. Fink, “The Impact of Changing Technologies on the Roles of Farm and Ranch Wives in Southeastern Ohio,” and Sarah Elbert, “Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures,” in Jane B. Knowles and Wave G. Haney, eds., *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1988), 229-241. Virginia Fink also argued that because manual labor and household labor is the least valued in American society, farm women were “invisible” workers. She wrote: “As male tasks increased in a market economy and women’s decreased, women’s work was devalued even more than the traditional patriarchal notion of it as less important; women were incorporated in more subservient ‘helper roles.’” Likewise, Sarah Elbert wrote that women urgently resisted the idea that they should abandon their role as producers. Elbert argued, “Only a continued role in production could ensure equality; if they could not remain producers, they were doomed to dependency, and they knew it.”

a sphere of work that they once defined as their own.” Instead, scholars should focus on why inequality persisted in the countryside as technology changed rural society and gender-defined tasks. In other words, rather than assuming that women lost power within the family, it would be more constructive to ask how, over time, they renegotiated strategies of mutuality.<sup>33</sup>

Likewise, Sarah Elbert generally agreed that women had lost many of their productive roles on the farm, but she also found that even in the 1960s and 1970s, male farmers still relied on a family labor force. On the modern farm, women often ran the business, used computers, and directed or coordinated “farm tasks on CB radios.” This reflected the idea that women wanted a role in the farming enterprise, and that women had “not been self-sacrificing so much as they have been self-actualizing through the sense of ‘us’ and ‘ours’ that characterizes family farms.” She concluded that, though women’s work had changed, their commitment to the success of the farm had not, and women by the late 1980s were demanding a “progressive public policy to save our land and our way of life.” Therefore, she believed that agricultural economists and policy makers needed to increase their awareness of women’s participation in farming, and reshape agribusiness to embrace familial work patterns.<sup>34</sup>

The debates over the status of farm women and the changing nature of mutuality within the context of commercialized agriculture, has also affected the ways in which scholars have viewed women’s participation in agricultural organizations. Some scholars

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<sup>33</sup> Lorraine Garkovich and Janet Bokemeier, “Agricultural Mechanization and American Farm Women’s Economic Roles,” in Jane B. Knowles and Wave G. Haney, eds., *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1988), 211-228.

<sup>34</sup> Sarah Elbert, “Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures,” in Jane B. Knowles and Wave G. Haney, eds., *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1988), 229-241.

have argued that conservative organizations that were divided along gender lines did very little to promote women's activism simply because these organizations did not promote obvious policies of gender equity. Mary Neth argued that because women organized informal neighborhood networks, they also found greater opportunities in grass-roots organizations that welcomed women's involvement on an equal footing with men. These organizations included the left-leaning Farmer's Union and the Non-Partisan League, which Neth found to embrace rural social customs, neighborhood networks, and mutual, familial work patterns. It was these grass-roots movements, growing out of agricultural unrest, which gave women the most significant opportunities to gain leadership skills. By working at the local levels, women gained access to power not through official positions, but "transformational leadership," a concept based on "an open, responsive-to-the-follower approach that focuses on values, mission, qualitative thinking, and shared power." But Neth reserved this concept for particular agricultural organizations. She believed that the more conservative American Farm Bureau Federation, and its state, county, and local organizations, ran counter to rural traditions and did not necessarily provide women with similar opportunities. With its emphasis on business, formal education, and gradual change, the Farm Bureau "formalized the separation of men's business from women's homes," and "discouraged women's traditionally active role in community groups." These conclusions were based on the idea that Homemaker's Clubs had "few direct ties to the business of men," while the Farmer's Union "included the whole family," giving each member over the age of sixteen an individual vote within the organization. In contrast, members of the Farm Bureau joined as

family units, with each family having just one vote. This policy implied to Neth that only male heads-of-household could thereby express their opinions.<sup>35</sup>

Yet, just as this dissertation will argue that commercialization did not necessarily remove women from agriculture production, it will also illustrate that even conservative women's organizations, and those that did not recognize gender equity, were still highly effective in organizing women and raising awareness. The main targets scholars have chosen as discriminatory toward women are the state Cooperative Extension Services and the Farm Bureau, both of which seemed to promote "separate spheres" ideologies. However, in her study of Home Demonstration Agents in the South, historian LuAnn Jones found that by examining the relationships between farm women and Extension personnel at the local levels, a much different picture emerged than when studied from the federal and state perspectives. Far from imposing ideals of "separate spheres" on farm women, Home Demonstration Agents usually believed that through education and the improvement of women's domestic skills, they could actually promote greater equality in the countryside. Agents also struggled to satisfy the demands of their constituents. Extension programs were only successful if women attended the meetings, and they only attended meetings if they believed the information was relevant and useful. Ultimately, by conveying their demands for specific programs, "club members could prove the final arbiters of agents' professional success."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 131-142; Lorna Clancy Miller and Mary Neth, "Farm Women in the Political Arena," in *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures*, ed. Wava G. Haney and Jane B. Knowles, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1988), 358, 378.

<sup>36</sup> LuAnn Jones, *Mama Learned Us to Work: Farm Women in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 24, 124, 138.

Likewise, historian Katherine Jellison articulated a similar argument to that of Neth, citing the membership and voting practices of the Farmer's Union as indicative of policies favoring gender equity. But Jellison also found that during the 1930s, women in the Farm Bureau not only believed in the importance of their work, but they also discussed economic and social policies intended to better the lives of all farm people. Quite often, these women expressed the idea that if more women would be involved in politics and policy debates, they would better represent the rural population as a whole. This trend continued throughout the twentieth century, as illustrated by Deborah Fink's study of a rural Iowa county where the Farm Bureau was an important outlet for rural women's activism during the early 1980s. It was the only agricultural organization available to women in the county Fink studied, and it was through the local township clubs that the women received information on agricultural policy. The Farm Bureau encouraged women to write to their legislators, participate in community-wide events, and to learn more about issues such as farm safety, agricultural marketing and investment, estate planning, political participation, and coping with family problems. In addition, the Farm Bureau also offered important social outlets, and offered women members field trips and informal lessons on home decorating and floral arrangement. Overall, the organization addressed a variety of issues and helped the women in Fink's study maintain their ties to agriculture and to their community. Therefore, the fact that most women worked through all-female organizations, with few opportunities to gain leadership positions within conservative, male-dominated groups, should not imply that women's work was somehow of less value.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Jellison, 78-79; Fink, *Open Country, Iowa*, 216-217.

The final problem with “mutuality” is that it implies too much equality between men and women, and presents a frustrating dichotomy to scholars trying to understand farm women’s perceptions of gender and their failure to directly challenge prescribed gender roles. This study will simply accept the fact that for all of the rhetoric surrounding women’s equal contributions to the farm and the essential nature of their work, that patriarchy was persistent in the Midwest throughout the twentieth century. Over time, even when Second Wave feminism opened doors for women in other professions, there were simply some spaces where rural and farm women did not feel comfortable, or even traverse, because of their gender. This is not to imply that women in the countryside were unaffected by Second Wave feminism, because like all Americans, many farm women encountered changing ideas about the roles of men and women in society. A transformation in attitudes toward women’s work is visible in farm periodicals of the 1970s, where journalists and editors took a new approach in their articles for women by integrating more information about business, farming, and politics with traditional articles on homemaking. These articles were not overtly feminist in nature, but they are indicative of the fact that editors and writers began to understand women’s work in new contexts. In some ways, the 1970s witnessed a resurgence of ideals advocated by early women leaders of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, who urged women to take on greater public roles. By the 1970s, however, women had gained greater confidence, as well as acceptance, in the public arena. Though they often voiced self-doubt and cited inexperience, many women successfully navigated the male-dominated world of agricultural business and politics.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Marian Lenzen to Jimmy Carter, 26 January 1977, WIFE Records, UNL.

Anthropologist Jane Adams argued that the rural women were not immune to the “feminine mystique” that shaped the public discourse during the 1950s and upheld domesticity and leisure as ideals for women. Immediately following the Second World War, the *Farm Journal* and its women’s insert *Farmer’s Wife*, featured articles that encouraged farm women to participate in politics and community activism, as well as articles that recognized women’s contributions as workers on the farm. By the mid-1950s, however, such rhetoric had disappeared. Instead, articles increasingly focused on domestic issues and considered women’s economic contributions to the farm as “‘a sideline’ providing money for luxuries and extras.” Over time, women featured in illustrations and photographs became “more shapely and fashion conscience,” while featured farm homes became modern and furnished with the latest consumer goods. Likewise, historian Katherine Jellison noted that during the 1950s and 1960s, farm periodicals featured advertising for women that emphasized “modern domestic settings,” and urban domestic ideals, rarely showing women engaged in farm work.<sup>39</sup>

Idealized images of farm women in popular magazines hardly reflected reality, and by the end of the 1960s, many of the major farm periodicals, including *Successful Farming*, dropped women’s sections because they had declined in popularity and advertisers were no longer interested in supporting them. In 1973, when asked about the demise of the *Farmer’s Wife*, a magazine published from 1909-1939, then absorbed by *The Farm Journal*, an editor from the Webb Publishing Company in St. Paul Minnesota explained that, “general women’s magazines were cutting too much of the advertising base from under specialized women’s

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<sup>39</sup> Jane Adams, “The *Farm Journal*’s Discourse of Farm Women’s Femininity,” *Anthropology and Humanism*, 29, no. 1 (2004), 49, 56; Jellison, 172-174.

magazines.” In other words, publishers believed that farm women no longer desired a magazine, or even a special section within a periodical, that emphasized their distinct nature. Farm women, it seemed, preferred the same magazines as urban women.<sup>40</sup>

When publisher Roy Reiman, based in Greendale, Wisconsin, heard about these trends in publishing, he recalled how his mother, a farm wife, depended on farm periodicals for information. Believing that farm women had not changed and given up their agricultural identities, Reiman saw this as an opportunity to start a new magazine specifically for farm women that better addressed their interests. In 1970, Reiman Publishing released the first issue of *Farm Wife News*, and within three weeks 38,000 women subscribed. By the early 1980s, this number reached 2.3 million, and the magazine was renamed *Country Woman*. From its inception, *Farm Wife News* presented a wide variety of material, from recipes and sewing patterns, to the latest news on agricultural policy from Capitol Hill and information on caring for livestock. The magazine was entirely ad-free, depending only on subscriptions for financing. Reiman wanted the magazine to offer a “forum” for farm women, and the magazine often asked readers to write in response to various questions, including women’s opinions on agricultural policies, farming practices, consumer products, or current events. Over time, women began writing to the editor that their husbands also read *Farm Wife News* because of its information about trends in agriculture, and when the magazine began selling t-shirts that read, “Proud to be a farmer’s daughter,” readers demanded that they also print shirts to read, “Proud to be a farmer’s son.” The magazine proved popular with the entire family, and in the November 1976 issue, Mrs. E.P. Lowe of Oxford, Mississippi wrote to the

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<sup>40</sup> Janet Galligani Casey, “‘This is YOUR Magazine’: Domesticity, Agrarianism, and *The Farmer’s Wife*,” *American Periodicals* 14, no. 2 (2004), 206.



editors that her son read every issue and recently commented (with great pride and humor), “The way I like this magazine, I guess I would have made somebody a good wife.”<sup>41</sup>

The *Farm Wife News* primarily featured articles submitted by readers themselves, thus allowing farm women to direct the content. The result better reflected farm women’s broad interests, and the articles by readers, as well as letters to the editor clearly illustrated that women had not adopted urban ideals or changed their identity, as suggested by trends in other farm periodicals. In November 1975, for example, Jean Estelle Samson of Nowata, Oklahoma wrote a short piece about a multiple choice beauty quiz featured in her favorite women’s magazines. The quiz asked questions about exercise and her beauty routine. In response to what factors influenced her hair style, Samson replied, “In all the choices, hooded sweatshirt or hayfield hat were not included.” And when asked to consider the types of beauty products she used regularly, Samson wondered whether insect repellent would count. She concluded, “I don’t seem to fit on a city woman’s beauty chart. When it comes to a beauty quiz, mine’s a *puzzle*” (emphasis in original).<sup>42</sup>

While much of *Farm Wife News* provided such lighthearted views of farm life, it also provided opportunities for women to learn about important issues and to become vocal activists. In November 1974, the staff of *Farm Wife News*, in conjunction with Women for the Survival of Agriculture in Michigan (WSAM), sponsored the first National Farm Women’s Forum, which resulted in the creation of American Agri-Women, an umbrella

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<sup>41</sup> “Sugar and Spice,” *Farm Wife News* 5, no. 11 (November 1975), 3; “Sugar and Spice,” *Farm Wife News* 6, no. 11 (November 1976), 2.

<sup>42</sup> Chris Beam, “The Reiman Reason: Reiman Publications’ Magazines are the Radio Call-In Shows of the Publishing World, Allowing Readers to Chat With Their Neighbors,” *Folio: The Magazine for Magazine Management* (15 September 1996), 18; Matt Neznanski, “Publisher Reiman addresses aspiring entrepreneurs,” press release in “Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication News,” (9 March 2006), <http://www.jlmc.iastate.edu/news/2006/spring/reimantalk.shtml>, INTERNET, accessed 4 October 2007.

organizations designed to unite farm women across the country. *Farm Wife News* continued to sponsor the annual forum, and it published articles designed to interest women in the business of farming. In November 1976, for example, an article told the story of Mary Ratcliffe of Sweet Home, Arkansas. Not only did she partner with her father to run the family farm, but when her husband died suddenly, Ratcliffe also took over his 1,800 acre diversified farm. The article lauded Ratcliffe's ability to deal with hired men, bankers, federal agents, and agribusiness men, as well as her commitment to her family and the fact that she "still has time for traditional hobbies like baking and sewing." Readers also demanded to know more about young farmers, and in July 1975, in response to reader demand, the editorial staff launched a series on farm management for young people. The first article featured the story of Dick and Colleen Burns, a couple in their 20's who managed a cattle operation near Brimfield, Illinois. Both Dick and Colleen were optimistic about the future of farming, and typified the ideals set forth in *Farm Wife News*. Colleen, a farm radio director, was highly knowledgeable about politics and prices, while Dick believed husbands and wives were full partners on the farm. He believed that although many city dwellers envisioned a farm woman as someone who "still wears long dresses, still wears a bonnet, and hoes the garden," he said, "A farm wife in my mind is one of the decision making-team."<sup>43</sup>

As a forum for women, *Farm Wife News* did not always focus on the idyllic, light-hearted, or business aspects of farming. Because the magazine served as a forum, editors often allowed women to express their frustrations. In June 1975, one anonymous farm wife wrote that she really did not enjoy farming and found no joy in country life. She, and the

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<sup>43</sup> Susie Harris, "Female Farmer Keeps Farm in the Family," *Farm Wife News* 6, no. 11 (November 1976); Marion Goetz, "Management is the Key to Success," *Farm Wife News* 5, no. 7 (July 1975), 24-25.

editors, asked, “Do others feel this way?” By August, *Farm Wife News* was flooded with letters on the topic. Darlene Graves of Perkins, Oklahoma chided the anonymous writer for wanting to live in the city. Urban life, Graves believed, was full of needless worry and could not compare to “watching a sunset while sitting on the pickup tailgate amidst the stubble of a newly cut wheat field.” Yet many other women supported the anonymous writer. Marilyn Graybill of Hershey, Pennsylvania admitted that she felt guilty for disliking farm work and for not helping more on the farm. Another anonymous writer stated that while she regularly performed chores and helped her husband in his daily work, she had never been “an avid farm wife.” One woman, who signed the letter “Not Guilty,” said she would easily give up farming in order to afford a new home and live closer to town. “Not Guilty,” wrote, “Oh, this endless lawn to rake and mow. All the corn husks and stalks that blow in after shelling or picking. Wouldn’t it be nice to have cement drives and sidewalks so no one would “track in” every time the door opened?”<sup>44</sup>

By the end of the decade, many of the leading farm periodicals recognized this new niche for farm women and overhauled women’s sections to include articles that emphasized their role in farming. For example, in 1979, journalist Cheryl Tevis joined the staff of *Successful Farming* as Associate Farm Management Editor. Formerly an associate editor for *Farm Wife News*, Tevis provided *Successful Farming* with important insights into the needs of farm women when she wrote a monthly column entitled, “Woman Interest,” as well as monthly features for women. In her inaugural column, she did not discuss recipes or handiwork, but rather discussed problems in agriculture and highlighted the efforts of Doris

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<sup>44</sup> “Sugar and Spice,” *Farm Wife News* 5, no. 6 (June 1975), 3; “Our Readers Say...” *Farm Wife News* 5, no. 8 (August 1975), 35.

Royal, a farm woman from Springfield, Nebraska, to reform estate tax policies. Tevis concluded, “The expression, ‘I’m just a farm wife,’ has no place in the farm woman’s vocabulary today.” She encouraged women to reconsider their self-image, and to promote a professional image of farm wives.<sup>45</sup>

In the months following, Tevis received an eager reception from female readers. Ann Boettcher of Big Sandy, Montana wrote to Tevis, “Thank you for putting farm women back in *Successful Farming*. I applaud you for noting the role of women on farms by giving us more than recipe, handcraft and homecraft space.” Likewise, Laura Beane of Ft. Atkinson, Wisconsin wrote, “It’s about time! So glad *Successful Farming* has awakened to the fact that farm wives are a real part of the farming business... I’ll be reading *SF* for the first time in a long time.” Women commended Tevis for her no-nonsense writing style and her willingness to tackle complex topics. In September 1979, for example, Tevis dedicated her second feature article to the issue of estate taxes. She explained that even if husbands and wives held property in joint tenancy, the entire value of the property would be included in the husbands’ estates. Unless widows could prove their contributions to building the estate, they had to pay estate taxes on the entire value of the property. With increasing land and equipment values, as well as complex tax laws, this policy forced many women to pay tens of thousands of dollars in taxes upon their husbands’ deaths, and sometimes had to sell the farm in order to do so. Tevis pointed out that while banks, attorneys, and farmers understood the important role of women on the farm, the IRS assumed that “all services the wife provides for her husband are gratuitous with no thought of subsequent payment.” Furthermore, it was difficult for women to provide evidence of their contributions because they rarely signed written

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<sup>45</sup> Cheryl Tevis, “Woman Interest,” *Successful Farming* (August 1979), 14.

partnership agreements, kept separate bank accounts, or kept detailed work diaries. While some women won tax refunds in court, Tevis, believed that the only solution was new legislation and radically different tax laws.<sup>46</sup>

It is no coincidence that Tevis addressed the issue of farm women and estate taxes in her first column, and dedicated her second feature article to the subject, because it was this very issue driving many farm women to become active in farm politics. In 1979, in an article for the *New Land Review*, Frances R. Hill, then working with the USDA on a nationwide survey of farm women, explained that the new farm women's movement developed from increasing concerns about estate taxes. She noted that during the 1970s, land values increased significantly, and more women began to understand that their work and economic contributions to the farm provided no legal protection or exemption from estate taxes upon the death of their husbands. Hill believed that because few of the major farm organizations acted on the issue and demanded new tax laws, women realized "they would have to organize on their own." The situation was actually advantageous for farm women because the tax issue was "non-threatening," and enabled them to act while asserting that they were not "libbers," or "man-hating, bra-burning feminists." Hill noted that while these new women activists sought equality and respect, they also made a concerted effort to "distinguish themselves and their organizations from what they take to be the feminist movement." Most amazing to Hill, however, was not the fact that it was women starting and running these new groups, but that these were the first new general farm organizations "founded in a quarter

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<sup>46</sup> Cheryl Tevis, "Woman Interest," *Successful Farming* (November 1979), 18; Cheryl Tevis, "How Does Estate Tax Law Cut the Cake – Equal Partner or Marital Helpmate?" *Successful Farming* (September 1979), 30-31.

century.” They ran “counter to the trend toward increased commodity specialization,” and formed an organization to address the wide range of problems facing all farm families.<sup>47</sup>

Even as this movement emerged and women created professional and political identities, gender-defined spaces persisted in the countryside. In her 2001 study of women in sustainable and organic agriculture, geographer Amy Trauger found that women in agriculture were more likely to adopt organic agricultural practices because they could not, or would not, seek access the financial, legal, and material resources to run a modern, mechanized farm. Furthermore, the necessary skills and social networks needed to run an organic farm grew out of traditional women’s farm work. Their efforts to raise small herds of livestock or flocks of chickens, grow fruits and vegetables, sell their produce to local markets, and perform farm work without machines, fertilizers, or other chemicals, more closely resembled the work performed by women on family farms throughout time. Few of the women Trauger surveyed used mechanized equipment or applied non-organic chemicals (usually fertilizers), and of those that did, most left these tasks up to their husbands and hired men.

Gendered spaces existed off the farm as well, and the women Trauger surveyed reported feeling “out of place” when they visited traditionally male meeting places like feed mills, equipment dealerships, hay auctions, sale barns, and farm shows. Business men and government agents did not always take them seriously and assumed the women were “just farm wives,” particularly if they farmed with their husbands. Yet this was not simply a case of discrimination on the part of men. Few of the women Trauger interviewed reconciled

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<sup>47</sup> Frances Hill, “Women and Farm Politics – National Level,” *Nebraska’s New Land Review* (Summer 1979), 10.

being both a “farmer” and a female, and found that their chosen profession made them very much unlike other women. When Trauger asked the women to define these differences, most women simply held out their hands, to show their roughness and the dirt under their fingernails. One woman said, “It’s obvious I work with my hands, and that sets me apart from most women I know.” Others reported hiding their hands in their shirtsleeves to conceal their appearance, or found that the women in town “just don’t understand.” Many reported feeling “unfeminine,” or not feeling “sexy” because of their work clothing and their inability to conform to popular fashions. One woman said, “I don’t feel very feminine. I don’t have time to take baths and pamper myself. I don’t have money to buy lingerie.” These examples are significant, because the women in Trauger’s study are the same women hailed by news reporters and journalists as those breaking boundaries and redefining the countryside. On the other hand, it is clear that ideas about femininity and gendered spaces have been and continue to be firmly entrenched in rural America.<sup>48</sup>

So while the concepts of “mutuality” and “relational feminism” are highly valuable analytical tools, and influence analysis of women’s activities throughout this study, it is more important to argue that women’s collective consciousness as an occupational group, as members of the agricultural community, is the overriding factor in the nature of their activism. Unlike women trying to break into new professions or become vocal in urban, middle class political movements, farm women between 1950 and 1990 did not stage a dramatic or sudden movement in search of gender equity because their identities were already defined by their relationship to agriculture. In the years following the Second World

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<sup>48</sup> Amy Trauger, “Getting Back to our Roots: Women Farmers in Sustainable Agriculture: Work, Space, and Representation,” (M.S. Thesis, The Pennsylvania State University, 2001), 55-69.

War, more and more women became actual partners in the farming enterprise by managing the business, co-signing loans, and purchasing land in their own name. And even if they did not legally own land, they often enjoyed a conceptual, mutual ownership. If the land and the farm prospered, so too would their families. When they married farmers, women understood that they would be called upon to work, not for wages or personal satisfaction, but for the good of the farm. Theirs would not be a life of leisure, even if they aspired to it. Again, however, this has proven highly problematic for many historians. The idea that women did not aspire to take on male roles, yet demanded an equal voice within the agricultural community, is confusing and contradictory.

Therefore, it is imperative to ask several questions: How could women express a sense of mutuality with men while facing limited access to land and resources? How could they feel effective in an organization when they did not usually participate in the primary leadership roles? Why would they continually push for greater recognition if they were entirely satisfied with strategies of “mutuality”? Simply implying that women enjoyed “mutual” relationships with men does not appear adequate in this case. “Mutuality” would not necessarily impel women to join an organization, to demand higher standards of living, to desire a greater role in the political process, or to speak out for a particular occupational group, especially an occupational group dominated by men.

One explanation is that women’s organizations during the latter half of the twentieth century actually replaced the vanishing informal neighborhood networks that previous generations depended upon for social and economic support. Unable to truly connect with urban women because of geographic distance and varied experiences, rural women found that organizations provided connections to other women with similar understandings of



agriculture as a way of life. As Deborah Fink observed, many women joined clubs and groups in order to find new “sisters,” and rebuild support networks lost through depopulation. She wrote, “They needed these new sisters because their biological sisters and other female kin lived elsewhere, no longer shared the same interests, or no longer had access to the same experiences. These new groupings were the basis of political interest groups.”<sup>49</sup>

Such demonstrations of solidarity illustrate the fact that farm women identified with other women, and they identified with men as partners on the farm, but they actually joined agricultural organizations in order to address perceived discrimination against farmers, the hardships of farm families, and standards of living in the countryside. They were concerned about depopulation, resources, economics, fair marketing practices, and most importantly, preserving a solvent, productive farm for future generations of their family. In the twentieth century, ideas of equal rights, especially those of Second Wave feminism were simply too individualistic and expressive of urban values. In general, farm women did not perceive Second Wave feminism to be compatible with ideals of cooperation, community, and mutuality, and this is why few women involved in agricultural organization challenged gender roles. In fact, many women made strong arguments as to the benefit and necessity of gender-defined tasks within a household, thereby articulating their perceptions of mutuality. This is not meant to imply that women placed less value on their activities as they did for those of men, or viewed themselves as subordinate, as the discussion on mutuality demonstrated, only that Second Wave feminism did not offer a practical strategy for rural women to achieve their goals. Ideas about gender and women’s proper roles were so much a part of rural life, that to question them would have undermined women’s efforts. The most

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<sup>49</sup> Rosenfeld, 26; Fink, *Open Country, Iowa*, 218.

effective strategies, they believed, still rested not in themselves as individuals, but in the overall success of the family and the farm.

Therefore, in order to study farm women's activism, this dissertation puts discussions of gender equality, mutuality, and relational feminism aside in favor of an analysis that emphasizes women's solidarity based on class and occupation. Sociologist Cornelia Butler Flora recognized the importance of this approach with the observation that farm women usually rejected "questions of women's rights." Because work and family were more closely related for farm families than for urban families, "the class interests of women are much more visible." Discussions of mutuality play a role when discussing the importance of all-female organizations, because this is where rural women have consistently found themselves to be most effective, and they emphasized their joint efforts with men. They used the rhetoric of mutuality and relational feminism to justify their activities to themselves, their families, and the communities.

This study will simply accept the fact that patriarchy was, and still is, firmly entrenched in American rural tradition, just as community, conformity, and interdependence are important aspects of country life. In order to understand why women did not necessarily challenge gender roles, one must also understand the importance of these values in shaping the women's perceptions of community. In her study of rural Iowa women, Deborah Fink formulated "Elsa's Hypothesis," to describe how women functioned as workers and as members of a community while negotiating their roles as women within in a patriarchal society. After Fink interviewed a farm woman named Elsa, who believed that no "decent" woman would work, Fink realized that Elsa was not talking about performing work on the farm, or sharing housework with neighbors. Rather, Elsa meant that no "decent" woman

would go beyond the immediate community to interact with strangers, especially strange men. In other words, work performed for family members or familiar neighbors was perfectly acceptable and earned women “admiration and respect” from their families and friends. Work performed independently among unfamiliar people, however, could have negative consequences. For example, Fink wrote, “A woman was considered brazen if she applied for a position in a lawyer’s office meeting strange men and engaging in their affairs, but an efficient and clever wife who managed an office for her lawyer husband and provided shrewd commentary on his legal cases over the dinner table was a prize.” Fink’s observation is helpful in explaining the importance of conformity and gender in shaping how women perceived their options as well as appropriate behavior.<sup>50</sup>

In applying “Elsa’s Hypothesis” to this study, it becomes clearer why women did not enjoy equal opportunities to assume leadership roles in major agricultural organizations, or to deal in policy on an equal footing with men. Yet it is counterproductive to seek out challenges to patriarchy or male spaces because this would not provide an accurate picture of the past, nor would it not provide an adequate analytical framework. Similarly, this study will not entirely depend on an analysis rooted in the ideology of “mutuality,” because this too falls short in truly explaining women’s motivations, as well as their contributions to the farm. Instead, this study will emphasize the ways in which farm women identified with agriculture, with rural traditions, and with their ties to the land. They did not challenge gender roles, but they certainly challenged the changing nature of agriculture and the decline of rural communities.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Fink, *Open Country Iowa*, 19-20.

<sup>51</sup> Cornelia Butler Flora, “Farm Women, Farming Systems, and Agricultural Structure: Suggestions for Scholarship,” *Rural Sociology* 1, no. 6 (1981): 386.

Though much has stayed the same, what has changed over time are farm women's strategies. One could easily argue that by the 1990s and 2000s, when the media began reporting on the phenomenon of the female farmer, this was really just a new approach that women in agriculture had based on decades of precedent. In 2005, a headline in the *Des Moines Register* declared, "In Large Part, the Land's Future is Up to Women." Without acknowledging the generations of farm women who joined agricultural organizations, raised children, shared in farm work, sold eggs and dairy products, or worked off-farm jobs to support the family enterprise, this article stated, "Now, more than at almost any other time in the state's history, women young and old must make decisions about the future of Iowa's farm land." And like many other news stories, this article emphasized the "steep" learning curve women encountered when taking over the farm. The writer nearly assumed that male farmers had an inherent knowledge of marketing, technology, banking, and finance, while women struggled to find the resources and information they needed to be successful. Yet a closer look at the words the women used to describe themselves and their commitment to agriculture told a very different story. The women farmers interviewed in the article expressed worries and thoughts very similar to those articulated by farm women throughout the twentieth century: concerns for solvency, good decision making and developing a business sense, keeping the land productive, maintaining high standards of living, and supporting agriculture as a way of life. One of the women in the article was Catherine Bay, a farmer from Monroe County, Iowa who worked with her three sisters to manage a farm that had been in her family for three generations. She had been part of the farming operation since she was "old enough to walk," and like many other women, she worried about future generations and what would happen to the farm once she retired. "We would like to not have

the farm parceled out” she said, “because a lot of sweat went into putting it together and Daddy left us a really nice operation.”<sup>52</sup>

Women’s commitments to agriculture explain how they constantly changed their strategies and adapted to conditions in the countryside. They increased their demand to be taken seriously over time because as farming became a commercialized business, so too did women want to participate in agricultural organizations as professionals. Women spoke out as members of a shrinking minority in the United States, and they continued to do so even when their manual labor was no longer required for the efficient operation of the family farm. Rather than feeling marginalized by commercialization and changing work roles, women both resisted and embraced modern American agriculture. They continued to redefine their roles as farm women, as contributors to the farm economy, and as members of a community. Despite social, economic, legal, and political limitations due to their gender, farm women involved in agricultural organizations have been persistent in claiming their own voice.

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<sup>52</sup> “Anne Fitzgerald, “In Large Part, the Land’s Future is Up to Women,” *Des Moines Register* (17 July 2005); Marttila-Losure, 12-19.

## Chapter 2

### “This Rich Gift of Voluntary Leadership”: The Roots of Rural Women’s Activism in the Midwest, 1900 – 1951

On 12 January 1915, Louise Stanley, the Vice President of the Missouri Homemakers’ Conference, addressed an audience of farm women at the annual meeting in Sedalia, Missouri. Simply by attending this conference, Stanley believed, those present proved that farm women played an important role in shaping the countryside. She envisioned a new era of farm women’s community involvement and said, “When the very dignified name of agriculturalists was given us it was such a big word and such a high-sounding title that we at once began ‘to sit up and take notice,’ and from that day to this the moss has been rolling off our backs and today we stand in the front ranks, socially, intellectually, and financially, and we stand ready to embrace every opportunity that knocks at our door.”<sup>53</sup>

Stanley concluded that farm women would build on their existing work patterns and neighborly relationships to create, “a bond of sympathy and mutual helpfulness that will aid us to higher and better things.” Such comments were typical of rural Midwestern women who joined agricultural organizations during the first half of the twentieth century, and built

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<sup>53</sup> Louise Stanley, “A Response to ‘Address of Welcome,’ by Mrs. Harry Sneed, Sedalia, MO, January 12, 1915,” in *Report of Missouri Home Maker’s Conference* (Sedalia, MO: April 1915), 15-16, in Missouri Extension Homemaker’s Association Records, WUNP 4682, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, MO.

In 1907, members of the Missouri State Board of Agriculture organized the Missouri Homemakers’ Conference in order to meet the needs of farm women. 120 women attended the first meeting in 1907, and nearly double attended the following year. Most of their activities, however, were limited to annual meetings where they viewed presentations on various aspects of home economics. In 1912, the Missouri State Board of Agriculture hired a home economist to organize county and district organizations and women began forming the first local clubs. In 1937, members voted to change the name of the organization to the Missouri Extension Homemakers Association, and subsequent leaders considered 1937 to be the official year in which the organization was founded. See “Minutes of the Missouri Homemakers’ Conference, 1911-1927,” 1; “Minutes of the Missouri Homemakers’ Conference, 1928-1949,” 17, 45-55; and “Home Economics History, 1912-1967,” in Missouri Extension Homemaker’s Association Records, WUNP 4319, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, MO.

upon their roles as wives, mothers, neighbors, and farm workers to gain authority within these groups. Women viewed themselves as viable contributors, not simply helpers.

Similarly, at the 1921 Iowa State Fair, Sarah Elizabeth Richardson, a farm woman from Mahaska County, Iowa, made an appeal for the inclusion of women in the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation (IFBF). She asserted that, “the Federation machine, great and glorious though it is, will never be able to function 100 percent efficiently until the women have climbed into the bandwagon.” In order to guarantee success for the entire organization, she urged IFBF leaders to “get the women, if you want to hold the men.” This speech prompted the organization’s male leaders to act, and five months later, in April 1922, the IFBF Secretary, E.H. Cunningham, convened a group of eleven women to discuss how women might contribute to the organization on the state level. This meeting led to the creation of an interim Women’s Committee, which became a permanent entity the following year.<sup>54</sup>

In 1937, after serving fifteen years as the chairwoman of the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation’s Women’s Committee (IFBFWC), Richardson still eagerly promoted mutuality and the importance of women within the organization. That year, she wrote that both men and women must be “interested and active” members, so that the goal of “a happy, contented, prosperous family on every farm” might be achieved. Richardson concluded that “the women’s committee in state, county, and township and school district is not a division, but rather a commission to carry out the program.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Sarah Elizabeth Richardson, *Iowa Farm Bureau Messenger* (hereafter cited as *IFBM*), September 1921, 1. Throughout this study the Iowa Farm Bureau Women’s Committee will be referred to as the IFBFWC and the “Women’s Committee.” Use of the phrase “Farm Bureau women” will most often refer to all women participating in IFBF activities at the township, county, and state levels.

<sup>55</sup> Richardson, “Women and the Farm Bureau,” *Iowa Bureau Farmer* (hereafter cited as *IBF*), 1 (January 1937), 15. The IFBFWC operated as a functioning committee, not an auxiliary of the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation. Delegates from nine districts elected the nine members of the committee, and the chair

Both Stanley and Richardson put forth the rhetoric that they were not subordinate to men, and their programs on rural health, education, recreation, politics, and the home were an indispensable part of bettering the lives of farm people. Certainly women had long been involved in agricultural organizations, especially the Grange and the Populist movement of the late nineteenth century. The passage of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914 which provided federal funds for the development of state cooperative extension programs, significantly extended the reach of some farm organizations, and fostered the development of homemakers clubs. These clubs were decidedly non-partisan and initially, apolitical, and therefore appealed to a wide audience. More importantly, however, these clubs provided rural women with opportunities to become active in local, state, and national politics. In the years between 1920 and 1950, members of rural women's clubs established their legitimacy and defended the principle that they deserved equal recognition within organizations.<sup>56</sup>

In Iowa, Nebraska, and Missouri, rural women's clubs developed at approximately the same time and used similar strategies for building membership, and leadership, at the state, county, and township levels, but they also differed significantly due to various budgets and resources, and in some cases, their objectives for farm women. In Missouri, for example, one of the early state-wide women's organization, the Women's Progressive Farm Association (WPFA), a division of the cooperative Missouri Farmers' Association (MFA), was actually designed as not only an educational and social group, but also a marketing

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served as a voting member of the IFBF Executive Committee. Women were also very active on the local levels. The role of vice president of the county and township bureaus was usually reserved for women to ensure women's participation.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.; For more on women involved with nineteenth century rural communities and agricultural movements, see Donald B. Marti, *Women of the Grange: Mutuality and Sisterhood in Rural America, 1866-1920* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991); Luna Kellie, *A Prairie Populist: The Memoirs of Luna Kellie*, ed. Jane Taylor Nelsen (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992); Nancy Grey Osterud, *Bonds of Community: The Lives of Farm Women in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).



organization. Of women's organizations in the three states, however, the IFBFWC was the largest and most expansive, and it was the first to develop extensive, uniform leadership networks extending into each of the state's counties. The IFBFWC also provides an excellent case study because members used a system of training schools for disseminating information to local leaders, which was a common model utilized by Extension personnel and agricultural organizations in other states. An analysis of the training school system, as well as early leadership patterns, reveal that the first thirty years of the Iowa Farm Bureau Women's Committee was an era of consolidation and growth when women reshaped and managed Farm Bureau programs to meet their own interests. Furthermore, the development of the IFBFWC mirrored that of other states. In general, women's programs began during the 1910s and 1920s as practical activities, often lead by home demonstration agents, which focused on family and home improvements. During the 1930s and 1940s, as women began to define themselves as agricultural activists with interests beyond the family and home, women's activities came to focus less on practical education and more on social activism, especially in the area of membership for the entire organization.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> See also similar studies by historians Mary Neth and Nancy K. Berlage, who skillfully illustrated the complexity of women's roles within state Farm Bureaus by considering how women used their feminine authority in the home, family, and community to gain power within the organization. Yet both Neth and Berlage argued that this influence had gendered connotations and did not allow women complete participation. Berlage, for example, noted that a complex rhetoric of partnership between men and women shaped women's involvement by allowing women to at times declare equality between the sexes, while at other times to exploit their unique authority over the business of the home. This allowed state Farm Bureaus to capitalize on women's participation to expand its appeal as a family and farm organization, integrating "those institutions that members believed were integral to agriculture." Likewise, Neth observed that within the Wisconsin Farm Bureau, women discussed agricultural issues, but were primarily relegated to an auxiliary organization devoted to issues of the community, home, and family. She found that Wisconsin women valued the importance of their work, but often struggled to gain recognition for their efforts within the organization. Nancy K. Berlage, "Organizing the Farm Bureau: Family, Community, and Professional, 1914-1928," *Agricultural History* 75, no. 4 (2001): 426-429, 407; Mary Neth, "Building the Base: Farm Women, the Rural Community, and Farm Organizations in the Midwest, 1900-1940," in *Women in Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures*, Wava G. Haney and Jane B. Knowles, ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988), 339-356.

Like the women in agricultural organizations throughout the American countryside, Iowa Farm Bureau women worked within gendered parameters and focused on such gender-appropriate issues as the family and home, education, civic improvement, and health. Yet they also expanded their reach into agricultural issues, often discussing and speaking out on inflation, production, and soil conservation. For example, in an address to an audience of men and women at the 1923 Annual convention, Bertha Cutler of Harrison County stated that the IFBF could ensure greater prosperity by promoting more efficient production methods. She praised Farm Bureau programs on bookkeeping, technology, and agricultural methods, as well as programs geared toward the home and community. Cutler asserted that Farm Bureau programs, “enabled farmers of the Middle West to hang on and keep striving in the dark deflation days of 1920 and 1921,” and she predicted a bright future for the organization in Iowa.<sup>58</sup>

Founded in 1919, the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation consolidated existing county organizations and became the social and political counterpart, as well as a partial financial contributor, to the government-sponsored Extension Service. Both groups agreed that traditional politics, education, and mechanization, not radical political action, would bring about positive changes for farm families. The IFBF prided itself on being a progressive yet politically conservative organization. Leaders garnered support by promoting it as a non-partisan and family-oriented group where members joined, paid dues, and voted as family units.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *IFBM* 4 (February 1923), 3.

<sup>59</sup> Lowell K. Dyson, “Farmers’ Organizations,” *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Institutions* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 14.

The importance of the partnership between the Cooperative Extension Service and the Farm Bureau, and other organizations, must not be underestimated. In Iowa, their complex and interdependent relationship began in the early twentieth century, when the Extension Service relied on donations from local and private donors to carry out its activities. To ensure greater statewide consistency in Extension activities, in 1913 the Iowa General Assembly passed legislation to create county farm aid associations, as well as a tax to support such organizations. These county associations, then, were required to raise set sums toward hiring and maintaining an Extension agent. Over time, the county aid associations, or farm improvement associations, became known as farm bureaus. Following the First World War, the financial relationship became even more important. In 1919, the federal government terminated wartime funding to the Extension Service. Fortunately for Extension, 1919 was the year in which the newly formed IFBF consolidated county farm bureaus under state leadership and began to recruit members in record numbers. Throughout the 1920s, in many counties, Farm Bureau dues paid for Extension agents' salaries, as well as for office space and educational materials. In 1924, for example, Extension Director R.K. Bliss estimated that Farm Bureau memberships provided approximately \$330,000 for Extension activities, over \$100,000 more than the wartime funding from the federal government before it was terminated. In some areas, Extension agents and Farm Bureau leaders worked together so closely that many rural residents falsely believed that they needed to be Farm Bureau members in order to take advantage of Extension activities.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Dorothy Schwieder, *75 Years of Service: Cooperative Extension in Iowa* (Ames, 1993), 20-22, 34-37.

Across the Midwest, the earliest Extension activities were geared toward men and most often focused on corn and hogs. Programs for women, however, gained greater priority following the passage of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914. In Iowa, women had actually been active in the county farm bureaus as leaders and members since the 1910s, but in January 1919 only one woman, a home demonstration agent, was present at the inaugural meeting of the IFBF. In 1920, the all-male IFBF Executive Committee adopted a resolution recognizing the lack of interest on the part of “the farmer’s wife in the Farm Bureau organization, due no doubt to the lack of knowledge as to the status of the farmer’s wife in the ranks of the organization.” Yet their need to increase women’s participation was not based on a desire to promote gender equity. Because the Farm Bureau advertised itself as a family organization, many leaders deduced that more men would attend meetings if their wives and children were also invested.<sup>61</sup>

Founded in 1922, IFBFWC programs proved extremely popular. As the first chairwoman, Richardson adamantly insisted that the women’s programs at the state, county, and township levels should not constitute auxiliaries or Home Bureau counterparts to the main organization. Instead, members of the IFBFWC designated their committee as a working part of the IFBF, with the chairperson serving as an ex-officio, and later a voting member of the Executive Committee. In general, women accepted their authority over the home demonstration activities, but defined themselves as agricultural activists, working for the betterment of agriculture and rural life as a whole. By 1924, the Women’s Committee had organized over 1,100 townships. In 1925, their programs reached an estimated 158,000

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<sup>61</sup> Donald B. Groves and Kenneth Thatcher, *The First Fifty: History of the Farm Bureau in Iowa* (Des Moines: Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, 1968), 51, 54

women in the state. Within just a few years of its formation, then, the Women's Committee established itself as an integral and indispensable part of the IFBF.<sup>62</sup>

Male leaders throughout the 1920s recognized the presence of women with ample praise for their leadership abilities. At least publicly, men put forth no resistance to the development of new programs. In a speech at the 1923 State Farm Bureau Convention, IFBF Secretary E.H. Cunningham told members that the organization should give women's work serious consideration since it was, "unquestionably the most stabilizing influence in the organization." He favored the idea of mutual cooperation, with men working for the "farm problems" and women for the "home problems," and hoped to create the "most harmonious co-operation within the ranks of a farm organization."<sup>63</sup>

A reporter writing about the 1923 convention noted the increased numbers of women in attendance. The reporter described how the women's notebooks and pencils were in "constant use," and lightheartedly warned, "if the 'lords of creation' don't look alive one of these days the lady workers will be reaching for the steering wheel." Then, three years later, in 1926, when more than 300 women attended the Annual convention, an observer made note of the different perceptions of work and involvement between rural and urban women when he wrote, "I have listened all over the place and haven't heard a single man show any resentment or antagonism toward the women. Can't say as much for some conventions of city folks."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.; Sarah Elizabeth Richardson, *IFBM* (September 1921), 1.

<sup>63</sup> Annual Report of Home Economics Extension Work, 1923-1924, Cooperative Extension Service in Agricultural and Home Economics, Records, RS 16/3/0/1, University Archives, Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa (hereafter cited as Cooperative Extension Service Records).

<sup>64</sup> "Women's Part in Bureau Growing" *Iowa Farm Bureau Messenger* 4, no. 6 (February 1923); "The Women's Side of the Farm Bureau Convention," *Iowa Homestead* (21 January 1926).

Women also established county programs without arousing much, if any, heated debate among male leaders about whether women *should* partake in organizational activities. More often, county leaders and Extension agents complimented the women's work and often made efforts to ensure that women's programs received equal attention. This is significant in Iowa, because in most counties the chair of the Farm Bureau women's committee also served as the vice-president of the entire county organization, and women often served on budget and leadership committees. In an address to the IFBF in January 1924, R.K. Bliss, the Director of the Cooperative Extension Service, called the establishment of the IFBFWC "one of the most constructive acts" of the Farm Bureau. He reminded the audience "the women have been one of the most important factors in developing township and community meetings. What would our township and community meetings amount to if it were not for the women?"<sup>65</sup>

The main obstacles for women during these early years were not vocal male opponents or reluctant female leaders, but rather shortages of *active* male supporters who

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<sup>65</sup> R.K. Bliss, "Farm Bureau Educational Program, an Address." Iowa Farm Bureau Federation at Des Moines, 16 January 1924, IFBF Records. Local male leaders often made similar positive comments regarding women's work. See: W.H. Stacy and H.J. Metcalf, "Farm People Testify to Farm Bureau Work," *The Burlington Hawkeye* (13 February 1926); H.J. Metcalf, "Farm Bureau Leaders Here," *Estherville Enterprise* (30 December 1925); Mrs. A. A. Graham, "Women are Busy in Farm Bureau Work," *Kossuth County Advance* (January 1923), IFBF Records. In spite of all the praise for farm women involved in community activities, news reporters and members of organizations still found it necessary to check that women still fulfilled their primary roles as wives and mothers. For example, in 1929, the *Des Moines Register* awarded free subscriptions to eleven farm women who exemplified community activists. Rather than report on their activities, however, the headline announcing their awards read, "Eleven Do Not Neglect Homes: Community Boosters are Homemakers, Too." The article reported that nine of the eleven homemakers rated as "far above average" homemakers, one rated as "above average," and one rated as "average." Furthermore, all of the women's families had radios, telephones, and automobiles, while nine of the eleven lived in homes with electric lights, running water, and furnace heat. This indicates that the women recognized for activities in their community were from extremely prosperous farms, since most Iowa farm families still did not enjoy these modern conveniences. All of the women were also avid readers, and two of the women reported reading six or eight different farm journals, though this was not necessarily for intellectual or professional development. Their reading and efforts to be good homemakers, the women reported, were part of a greater goal to "obtain for their children a better education than they themselves have received." See "Eleven Do Not Neglect Homes," *Des Moines Register* (18 August 1929).

worked to establish specific programs, appoint leaders, and allocate financial resources. Even in 1924, when women's activities had become firmly established, and only two counties remained unorganized, Richardson reported at the Annual convention that the women's programs were "handicapped by total lack of working funds." The IFBFWC adopted a unified state plan in 1923, but its provisions were vague and focused on local improvements, rather than the consolidation of local organizations under state leadership. The committee's local emphasis should not be surprising, since it was the most economic and efficient way to develop leadership. Because the Extension Service and county dues funded these local programs, they required no financial assistance from the state federation.<sup>66</sup>

The day after Richardson's speech at the 1924 Convention, the Executive Committee, convinced by "a very insistent demand for increased service and wider activities," appropriated \$4,000 as a tentative budget for women's activities. According to a notice in the *Iowa Farm Bureau Messenger*, the officers and committee members had been "looking forward to the time when the women's work in the Farm Bureau could be given something more tangible than just words of praise." With their budget secure, the IFBFWC adopted a new five-point program: to consolidate and solidify the general policies of the Women's Committee, to cooperate with other women's organizations, to develop a system of diplomas

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<sup>66</sup> Memorandum, "Farm Bureau Women Adopt Unified State Plan," 1923; "Township Organization for Home Project Work," 1923, IFBF Records. Though this paper asserts that the Iowa Farm Bureau had no shortage of women leaders, the organization still found resistance. For example, in 1922, when Ruth Buxton Sayre became the women's chairperson of Virginia Township in Warren County, she found it extremely difficult to secure the five local leaders and nine school district cooperators necessary to organize the township. Sayre later recalled her first day of canvassing the township in her Model T Ford, with her young daughters in the back seat, and meeting women who felt they were too busy or too ill for Farm Bureau activities. Others refused because their husbands would not want them to do "anything like that."

For some families, their membership in the Farm Bureau may have been a matter of economics. At five dollars per annual membership, participation may have been too expensive for farmers struggling to repay debts and mortgages. Julie McDonald, *Ruth Buxton Sayre: First Lady of the Farm* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1980), 39-42; *Iowa Farm Bureau Messenger* 7, no. 4 (December 1925); Dorothy Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1996), 148-150

for work done by Farm Bureau women, to support a special study of marketing, and to adopt a standardized report form, to be used by women statewide. Funding allowed the women's committee to act more effectively on their state plan, and work toward eventual uniformity of programs across the state, activities that would define the IFBFWC throughout the 1930s and 1940s. During the mid to late 1920s, however, they still focused on developing county leaders.<sup>67</sup>

In order to build county organizations and develop local leadership, Iowa Farm Bureau women relied on a highly developed system of training schools the IFBFWC and the Extension Service created. County Farm Bureau leaders, in conjunction with Home Demonstration Agents, formed educational and organizational networks with representatives from the state, townships, and school districts. Courses lasted for five months and usually consisted of one one-day meeting each month. During the rest of the month, then, township leaders trained school district cooperators and gathered feedback before the next lesson. This provided local women with a means of voicing their opinions about the lesson and developing their own curriculum.

Development of the training school system depended on the active participation of the Extension Service. Although the Extension Service claimed to work with various organizations, including the Grange and the Iowa Farmer's Union, the Farm Bureau enjoyed a close administrative partnership with, and made significant financial contributions to, Extension activities. The training school system grew out of this partnership and benefited

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<sup>67</sup> The IFBFWC sought to consolidate state programs by creating uniform county organizations, with a woman serving as vice-president, and a five-woman committee in charge of selecting projects. Their objectives also included provisions to work with men whenever possible to strengthen the organization. "Women Took Active Part in Convention," "Special Appropriation for Women's Work," and "Women Plan Work for the Year," *IFBM* 5, no 6-7, (February-March 1924).



both parties in their efforts to reach rural families. Neale S. Knowles, the head of the Home Economics Division of the Iowa State Cooperative Extension Service from 1908 to 1935, initially developed this method of filtering information through local instructors because it allowed agents and county leaders to reach 15 to 20 times the number of households they could reach on their own. Farm Bureau leaders likewise used this method to recruit new members, and they relied on the practical Extension activities to attract individuals who might not otherwise be interested in a social and political organization.<sup>68</sup>

The training school system met with immediate success and expanded rapidly during the 1920s. The first training school in Iowa took place in Monroe County in April 1921. That year, 2,050 women attended training schools in eighteen different counties. Projects included clothing, sewing, home management and furnishing, nutrition, and poultry. In 1922 and 1923, the head of the Home Economics Extension, Neale S. Knowles, noticed an “unusual awakening of interest in the counties without agents,” as 40,985 women attended 2,566 training schools just on clothing; nutrition training schools attracted 12,906 women that year; 4,862 were present for home furnishings; and 2,916 attended schools on strengthening the Farm Bureau. The sudden surge in popularity may be attributed to several factors, including better communication, automobile ownership, and improved roads, but also to a rising awareness of inequality between urban and rural standards of living.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Schwieder, *75 Years of Service*, 36-37.

<sup>69</sup> “Women of Iowa Farms Have Shown Great Enthusiasm in Furthering Interests of Better Agriculture,” 1922, Cooperative Extension Service Records; “Statistical Report of Project Work done by Specialists and Home Demonstration Agents, 1922-1923,” Cooperative Extension Service Records; Knowles, “Annual Report of Work Done by Neale S. Knowles, State Leader of Home Demonstration Agents, 1922-1923,” Cooperative Extension Service Records.

Training schools were not only popular but extremely memorable. During the 1970s, when writing their history, the women of the Mahaska County Farm Bureau believed that the training school system developed “a spirit of service and the opportunity to assist in the building of the county and township Farm Bureau.” This spirit of service came out of projects focusing on foods and nutrition, home nursing, making of

By attending home demonstration programs, women could not only learn how to quickly and cheaply modernize their homes and methods, but also to learn about leadership and community involvement. They used the meetings as an opportunity to build associations with other farm women and farm families for a deeper sense of community pride and solidarity. In 1922 Kossuth County chair Evelyn Graham reported that the monthly Farm Bureau meetings filled a “long felt want” and provided women with a chance to develop “community spirit and a desire to help each other.” Home demonstration programs that encouraged women to be “well dressed” and “well fed” provided a much needed boost to their confidence that they too could “enjoy the world outside the four walls of her own home as much as her city sisters do.”<sup>70</sup>

Although most women participated in programs geared toward the home, they viewed home demonstration programs as essential to overall community improvement. At the IFBF’s annual convention in 1926, Richardson told members that because women made consumer choices about spending for the home, they should be “good businessmen,” not only as homemakers but also as partners in the farming enterprise. By efficiently managing the farm

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braided rugs, the washing and carding of wool, cheese making, the use of sewing machine attachments, and the making of dress forms. Women in both Iowa and Missouri also fondly recalled mishaps that occurred regularly during training sessions. In Mahaska County, for example, Josephine Van Zomeren wrote, “The making of dress forms was quite an interesting ordeal. The lady would slip off her dress and put on an undershirt, over this was placed sticky tape until the dressform was made. One had to stand perfectly still while the form was being made and until it was dry, or a wrinkle would appear. At one meeting where one was being made it was a little too much and the lady fainted.” Likewise, in Benton County, Missouri, member Gladys Breshears recalled, “At one of the early classes, a lesson, ‘How to use a pressure cooker,’ one lady brought green beans of poor quality to can.” Despite the objections of the home demonstration agent, the woman “insisted they be canned, as they would taste better than snow balls.” Mrs. Walter (Josephine) Van Zomeren, “Mahaska County Farm Bureau Women’s Club,” (December 1971), Mahaska County Farm Bureau Women, Records, Iowa Women’s Archives, Iowa City, Iowa; Interview with Gladys Breshears by Ann Kahler (March 1984), Missouri Extension Homemakers Association, Oral History Project, WUNP 4650, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, MO.

<sup>70</sup> Dorothy Schwieder, “Changing Times: Iowa Farm Women and Home Economics Cooperative Extension in *Midwestern Women: Work, Community, and Leadership at the Crossroads*, eds. Lucy Eldersveld Murphy and Wendy Hamand Venet. Bloomington: Indiana University Press (1997), 207; Mrs. A.A. Graham, “Women Are Busy in Farm Bureau Work,” *Kossuth County Advance*, June 1922, 23.

and getting involved in the Farm Bureau, women could work to ensure greater profits for farmers through reduced freight rates, equalized taxation, and “legislation that takes notice of the farmer’s needs.” At the same convention, Farm Bureau member Minnie Friedley of Black Hawk County spoke to the women about the importance of nutrition in rearing healthy, responsible children. After she pointed out that, the state often intervened on behalf of poorly fed children, one woman in the audience remarked, “Well, it never occurred to me before that I was saving taxes when I made the baby take his vegetables!”<sup>71</sup>

By the end of the 1920s, owing to demand from local women’s groups, training schools also began to include lessons on developing good citizenship through voting and political awareness, as well as on the nature of good government, democracy, and parliamentary law. In 1925, the first statewide citizenship course for women surveyed the organization of governments and the levying of taxes at the township, county, state, and federal levels. The course also discussed how Farm Bureau members could become involved at each level, and strongly encouraged women to take “seriously the privileges of citizenship recently granted to them.”<sup>72</sup>

Programs did not encourage farm women to challenge existing political systems, but rather to understand and use them to secure funding for rural education and health, as well as to advocate farm policies that ensured stable commodity prices. Leaders strongly encouraged women to exercise their voting rights, especially for the good of the farm. In an address at the 1926 annual convention, Addie Wood of Moville asserted that women should vote responsibly and have a “unified purpose and an active program.” By organizing around

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<sup>71</sup> “Mrs. Richardson’s Report” and “The Women’s Side of the Farm Bureau Convention,” *Iowa Homestead* (21 January 1926).

<sup>72</sup> “Citizenship Course for Rural Women Planned by Bureau,” *IFBM* 6 (July 1925), 3.

community issues such as health, education, and agriculture, Wood believed that the farm women could “do her share toward placing the American farm home in a proper position to aid in the demand for agricultural equity.”<sup>73</sup>

Farm Bureau programs also encouraged women to become more involved in community affairs by seeking leadership positions at the local level. To that end, female township leaders and school district cooperators also joined their male counterparts in attending county leadership training schools. There, with state leaders at the helm, they discussed the development of local meetings, the duties of leaders and committees, the nature of community ideals, agricultural issues, and leadership within rural organizations. Leadership schools also provided practical experience in conducting meetings, and contact with state leaders and prominent members of the community. Although they shared these meetings with men, in many instances women dominated the proceedings. Photographs from training schools in Mahaska, Fremont, and Manona Counties between 1922 and 1928 reveal the strong and active presence of women. This trend continued through the following decade, with 144 women and 125 men attending leadership training schools in seventeen counties during the winter of 1932 and 1933. Although the Extension Service cosponsored many of these activities, training schools played an important role in building and maintaining Farm Bureau Membership.<sup>74</sup>

As the agricultural depression of the 1920s and 1930s took its toll on Iowa farm families, women’s activities became even more important to the IFBF. At the onset of the

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<sup>73</sup> “Says American Farm Housewife Has Many New Responsibilities,” *IFBM* 7 (February 1926),3.

<sup>74</sup> The seventeen counties included Hancock, Muscatine, Howard, Chicksaw, Floyd, Greene, Boone, Ida, Sioux, Shelby, Buchanan, Story, Wayne, Davis, Monroe, Carroll, Sac, and Calhoun. Women outnumbered the men at eight of the meetings, an equal number attended at two meetings, and men outnumbered women at seven meetings. The largest margin was in Sioux County, with twenty-one women and ten men attending. Photographs and County Leadership Training School Rosters, 1922-1933, IFBF Records.

Great Depression, between 1930 and 1933, IFBF membership declined from 63,968 to 18,016 paid family memberships, reaching the lowest point in the history of the organization. For those who were able to stay on the farm, women's activities with poultry, produce, and homespun goods were often an integral part of keeping the family farm solvent. Women's work not only reduced cash expenses, but often provided a regular cash income. Deborah Fink and Dorothy Schwieder have argued that, in spite of the decade's economic conditions, living conditions and social status actually improved for many rural women. Owing to their unique skills and abilities to "make-do," they no longer believed themselves inferior to urban women. At the same time, improved roads and rural electrification meant greater mobility and less time spent on daily chores, which in turn provided greater opportunities to participate in social activities.<sup>75</sup>

Just as many women sustained the family farm, so too did they sustain farm organizations. Though IFBF membership numbers dropped sharply during the Great Depression, women still participated in Extension programs and continued organization work for the Farm Bureau. For example, in 1929, Cherokee County Agent Clarence Turner proposed that the Farm Bureau try to develop more female leaders, since the women's programs "no doubt played an important part in keeping the membership at its present figure." Even in 1935, when the Cherokee County Farm Bureau had a membership of only 506 families, less than half of the average between 1921 and 1929, there were 116 female school district cooperators in fifteen townships, 147 local leaders, and 1,286 women who attended demonstration meetings. Across the state in 1930, 187,737 people attended home

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<sup>75</sup> Deborah Fink and Dorothy Schwieder. "Iowa Farm Women in the 1930s: A Reassessment," *Annals of Iowa* 49, no. 7 (Winter 1989), 577, 579-580.

economics demonstration meetings, and in 1931, 10,169 women still served as local leaders to help filter the lessons to the local levels.<sup>76</sup>

By the mid-1930s, it was this sustaining influence that gave women greater leverage in the state organization. Falling membership in the early 1930s meant fewer membership dues and less revenue from Farm Bureau commercial services, cooperatives, and insurance. By the middle of the decade the IFBF was in a precarious financial position. In 1935, IFBF secretary-treasurer V.B. Hamilton began to reorganize the financial and administrative structures of the Farm Bureau. First, he created a resolutions committee, made up of ten men and one woman, to formulate policies. Second, the IFBF established an administrative board to manage the budget and business aspects of the organization. Of primary concern was uniform record keeping for the commercial services at the county level in order to prevent instances of “misappropriation” by trusted employees. Also concerned about the future of the Women’s Committee, Hamilton found ready leadership in Ruth Sayre, who assumed leadership of the IFBFWC in 1937. For Farm Bureau women, centralization allowed for greater communication and would encourage growth over the next ten years.<sup>77</sup>

Sayre, a farmwoman and mother of four children from Ackworth, Iowa who married into agriculture in 1918, had long been interested in reshaping the women’s programs. In 1933, perhaps due to the dismal membership numbers, she persuaded Charles E. Hearst, president of the IFBF, to grant the chairperson of the Women’s Committee a voting seat,

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<sup>76</sup> Specific developments, especially for women’s activities, are difficult to track because between 1926 and 1936, the IFBF’s official publication covering statewide news was relegated to just a few pages in the American Farm Bureau Federation newsletter. Low membership numbers probably made it difficult to finance an official state-wide publication, while most county Farm Bureaus relied on local newspapers to advertise their activities. Though they lost a significant number of members, Cherokee County continued to publish a monthly 4-page newspaper, kept regular meeting minutes, and the County Extension reports are generally complete. For these reasons, the section of this paper dealing with the years between 1926 and 1936 will rely primarily on events in Cherokee County. “Cherokee County,” *Annual Narrative Report* (1929) 32; Fink and Schwieder, 583.

<sup>77</sup> Groves and Thatcher, *The First Fifty*, 187, 195, 197.

rather than an ex-officio position, on the Executive Board. Rather than describing it as a significant event, however, Sayre seemed to believe it was inevitable. She later said, “In the pioneer tradition of Iowa, women were always partners on the farm... Why shouldn’t they be partners in the Farm Bureau? I was pleased when women were released from their water-tight compartment and allowed to become involved in the whole Farm Bureau program, because that was the Iowa way.” A voting seat gave women gained an official voice on organizational matters and could begin to increase their influence at the state level.<sup>78</sup>

In her first year as the chair of the IFBFWC, Sayre set out to centralize women’s activities by developing township Farm Bureaus and improving the women’s bureaucracy to coordinate their activities. She wanted to see the establishment of a Farm Bureau, along with a strong program for women, in every township in Iowa. Sayre admitted that she had “no training in business administration and learned it the hard way,” but she called for systematic organization that required women to record the minutes of their meetings and receive training from Extension agents and IFBF staff members. Sayre was successful because women responded to her empowering language and her accessible leadership style, and also because IFBFWC offered Iowa farm women one of the only outlets for moderate political and social activism during the Great Depression, the Second World War, and the immediate postwar period.<sup>79</sup>

During the late 1930s, Roger Fleming, head of the IFBF’s newly created Research Department, worked with Sayre to create six pamphlets for county leaders on the subjects of health, libraries, taxes, international trade, and rural roads. Through these booklets, which

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<sup>78</sup> McDonald, 53.

<sup>79</sup> McDonald, *Ruth Buxton Sayre*, 57, 61.

also provided questionnaires by which leaders might gauge their success, the Women's Committee could more evenly disseminate their programs. The approach appeared to work. In 1937, 726 townships reported active women's committees; after two years, the number grew to 1,010 (out of 1,016 township Farm Bureaus). This period also saw growth in the main organization. Figures from January 1937 showed a 44 percent increase in membership, from 30,830 in 1935 to nearly 45,000 individuals and families in 1936. Not only did the IFBF have the largest membership gain in the country, but the organization seemed to have recovered from slipping numbers caused by hard economic times.<sup>80</sup>

Communication was the most essential element in consolidating the overall authority of the IFBF. In 1937 the organization introduced an Information Department responsible for producing a monthly magazine, the *Iowa Bureau Farmer*. The IFBF had been without a central publication since 1926, when it discontinued its four-page monthly newspaper, the *Farm Bureau Messenger*. Between 1926 and 1937, the official publication of the American Farm Bureau Federation inserted state news pages to be circulated in specific areas. Yet by the end of the 1930s, members the IFBF wanted a more local, sophisticated means of communication. Each month, the new *Iowa Bureau Farmer*, featured a column by President Francis Johnson, photographs, features on various leaders, and articles on the political and social activities of the IFBF. Since each family membership included a subscription, the

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 58; During the Great Depression, the IFBF retained its status as the largest general farm organization in the state, despite membership numbers dipping to approximately 18,000 families in 1933. This was a significant drop from previous years. In 1930 membership figures stood at 63,000. Robert L. Tontz, "Memberships of General Farmers' Organizations, United States, 1874-1960," *Agricultural History* 38, no. 3 (1964), 156; "Report of the State Chairman," Iowa Farm Bureau Federation Women's Committee, 1939, IFBF Records.



magazine enjoyed a large circulation. In 1939, the *Iowa Bureau Farmer* had a circulation of 35,000. By 1942, circulation stood at 53,442, and in 1943 it had increased to nearly 64,000.<sup>81</sup>

The Women's Committee also used this medium. Its main spokesperson was Bess Newcomer, a Moulton, Iowa farm woman who published a total of ninety-seven columns between 1937 and 1950, writing on a nearly monthly basis after 1941. Her columns are especially useful in understanding the shift in women's activities between 1921 and 1951 because Newcomer was involved with the IFBF throughout those years and her writings reflect women's attitudes at that time. Born on a farm west of Moulton, Iowa in 1893, Newcomer was raised by her mother, a widow, who supported the family through the sale of milk products and eggs to a hotel in Moulton, and managed the farm with the help of family and neighbors. In 1913, Newcomer graduated from Drake University in Des Moines, and taught school for several years before returning to the farm in 1922 with her husband, Ralph Newcomer. Shortly thereafter, she became involved with the county Farm Bureau women's organization and, in 1937, the women of that district elected her the Eighth District Committee Woman, and she served in this capacity until 1948.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> "Iowa Bureau Farmer and Publicity," Iowa Farm Bureau Federation Administrative Reports 1940, 1942, 1943, IFBF Records.

<sup>82</sup> Bess Newcomer, Papers. "Prospectus" for *My 70-Year Affair with the Wabash*, Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

In her article on Wisconsin Farm Bureau women, historian Mary Neth emphasized the importance early life experiences in shaping farm women leaders, and the factors that influenced their perceptions of work, gender, and organization. In her analysis of Farm Bureau leader Isabel Baumann, Neth found that because she participated in farm labor as a child and worked in the fields alongside her mother, Baumann had an all-encompassing sense of women's work on the farm. She did not believe that women's work was limited to the home, garden, and chicken house. Likewise, in Newcomer's writing it is clear that she understood her unique circumstances and how her mother's work and sacrifice shaped her perceptions as an adult. Newcomer dedicated her second column in the *Iowa Bureau Farmer*, in July 1938, to her mother for instilling in her children appreciations for work and nature, and a sensible "philosophy of life." Newcomer wrote, "She was short on money, so she gave us work; she was long on sense, so she gave us leisure. We were poor but never knew it." If she and her brother complained about the difficult farm labor, "[Mother] pointed out how spindly was the corn growing in the shade of orchard trees." Neth, 342-345; Newcomer, "Hobby or Heritage: A Tribute to my Country Mother," *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 2, no. 7 (July 1938), 9.

During the 1930s and 1940s, Newcomer was not the only woman writer featured in the *Iowa Bureau Farmer*, but she was the first woman to be a regular columnist. She always chose her own content and pictures, and she claimed that the editors did not restrict content or length. Furthermore, Newcomer declared that her column was “not a column for women, as editors’ surveys showed men [readers] in equal numbers.” The majority of her columns were on the topic of membership, which included commentary on the organization, leadership, and the obligations of members.

Newcomer’s writings clearly illustrate that the IFBFWC had evolved during these years from a women’s organization devoted to the home, family, and local issues, into an organization concerned with major social, political, and agricultural issues. Early columns tended to focus on building membership, using tax dollars to create rural libraries, supporting the war effort, and advocating good citizenship, soil conservation, and responsible farming practices. In the immediate post-war years she devoted more attention to consolidating rural schools, promoting fair tax policies for farmers, sustaining the idea family farm, and maintaining leadership within the organization. The issues changed in their relevance, especially as technology and the modernization of the rural home affected how women functioned within the IFBF. Like Sayre, Newcomer advocated organization and centralization as keys to achieving the Women’s Committee’s goals. She would always support Sayre as a leader with a natural ability to “gauge the processes of our growing or for our failure to grow.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., The editor’s surveys are no longer available to confirm her statements, but in the 1943 IFBF Administration Report, the Information Department included a statement specifically thanking Newcomer, “whose monthly features have been outstanding.” No other writer or contributor received such recognition either in 1943 or other years. IFBF Administration Report, Annual Conference, Des Moines, Iowa, November

For Sayre and the members of the IFBFWC, camaraderie was essential to centralization and growth. In 1941 the committee established a State Camp for Farm Women to bring county leaders together at a time other than the annual convention. The 173 women who attended the first camp slept in bunks at the Iowa State Fairgrounds. During the weekend they spoke with IFBF leaders, toured the state offices, and selected programs on nutrition and libraries for the coming year. Newcomer overwhelmingly approved the camp's proceedings and described how the women's visit to the state office gave them a new respect for the work of male leaders. Though the accommodations were rustic, members of the Women's Committee found it beneficial to hold a women's meeting entirely removed from IFBF conventions, and the summer conference became an annual event.<sup>84</sup>

In 1942, however, the IFBFWC abandoned the bunk beds at the Iowa State Fairgrounds and moved the "camp" to the Hotel Kirkwood in Des Moines, where women "enjoyed meals they didn't plan and dishes they didn't wash." The hotel staff also welcomed the farm women because they were the only guests to make their own beds and leave the rooms spotless. In addition to training activists, then, the summer conferences offered women an opportunity to get off the farm and remove themselves from their daily responsibilities.<sup>85</sup>

One of the first public projects for the Women's Committee was the founding of libraries in rural areas. This issue had been on their agenda for a number of years, but in 1938, and again 1940 and 1941, the Women's Committee took their concerns to the state government. In June 1940, Newcomer wrote that "America's very destiny may hinge on

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1943; Bess Newcomer, "Farm women put 2 and 2 together and get answer, first state camp for farm women proves big success," *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 5, no. 8 (August 1941) 6.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. No other state Farm Bureaus at this time held such meetings for their women's committees or auxiliaries, Iowa was the first to do so.

<sup>85</sup> Bess Newcomer, "We Marshall Our Reserves," *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 6, no.8 (August 1942), 5.

making sure that he who ploughs also reads,” and she argued that only state and federal aid help could equalize library services in rural and urban areas. The 1941 Women’s Committee Handbook stressed that the library programs would ensure not only education, but also the preservation of democracy. They called for the establishment of free regional libraries, which trained librarians staffed, and with an outreach system of bookmobiles and branches in schools, stores, gas stations, and other accessible locations.<sup>86</sup>

On 20 February 1941, ten committee women visited the state capitol to meet with Governor George A. Wilson and several legislators to promote a bill for a “literacy tax,” but legislators did not comply. Despite Wilson’s argument that defense and agricultural issues needed more immediate attention, Newcomer refused to accept this reason, arguing that, “We must go on – to quit is not in the fiber of country women.” The Women’s Committee would keep rural libraries and literacy on their agenda through the 1950s, even though their proposed legislation would also fail to impress Governors Bourke Hickenlooper and Robert D. Blue. In 1942, due to wartime shortages of labor and supplies, the women shelved the issue of rural libraries during the Second World War. Instead, they promoted an annual township reading contest, believing that such contests would foster demand for libraries among rural families. That same year, the Women’s Committee also began a scholarship fund to pay for two years of college for promising rural youth who worked to become teachers. By the late 1940s, however, the IFBFWC shifted its strategy, and instead of regional libraries, it began to focus the women’s efforts on rural school consolidation.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Bess Newcomer, “Books are Tokens of Mental Riches – Plows, Symbols of Power,” *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 7, no. 6 (June 1943), 9; *Iowa Farm Bureau Federation Women’s Committee Handbook*, 1941, IFBF Records.

<sup>87</sup> McDonald, *Ruth Buxton Sayre*, 64; Bess Newcomer, “Mother Visits the Legislature,” *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 5, no. 4 (April 1941) 5; Bess Newcomer, “Books are Tokens of Mental Riches – Plows, Symbols of

Meanwhile, the realities of Second World War shaped IFBFWC activities. At the summer conference in 1941, the women adopted the topic “Health for National Defense” for the statewide Home Project studies, and for the 1942-1943 study they developed a “War Emergency Program,” which entailed lessons on first-aid, home nursing, milk sanitation, and other adjustments for the homemaker in wartime. Though they fully supported the war effort, Sayre, Newcomer, and others also spoke out for peace. In June 1939, Cara Brown wrote an article in the *Iowa Bureau Farmer* entitled, “World Peace Through a Farm Woman’s Eyes.” Brown had studied the materials on international relations provided by the IFBFWC, and argued that while isolation was not a productive response to the situation in Europe, neither was war. Iowa farm women, Brown wrote, “would gladly make sacrifices, would even go barefoot. . . if they were positive that such a sacrifice would save their own sons and other mothers’ sons from slaughter.”<sup>88</sup>

Once the United States entered the war in December 1941, reactions were mixed. In her January 1942 column, her first following Pearl Harbor, Newcomer wrote without patriotic fervor. She was more concerned with how the IFBFWC might adjust programs and to what extent it should. Her question as to whether farmers should buy war bonds or pay to invest in labor-saving machinery was relevant to many farmers of that time, as was her concern for the wartime policies of price supports and prosperity in the post-war years. In fact, she addressed this issue more often than she urged farm families to engage in any sort of patriotic activities. In her February 1942 column she stated that “Now is the time to start

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Power,” *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 7, no 6 (June 1943), 9; *Iowa Farm Bureau Federation Women’s Committee Handbook*, 1941, IFBF Records.

<sup>88</sup> Ruth Sayre, “Women’s Committee,” *Iowa Farm Bureau Federation Annual Report* (Des Moines: Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, 1942) 15, IFBF Records; Mrs. Rollin Brown, “World Peace Through a Farm Woman’s Eyes,” *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 3, no. 6 (June 1939) 6.

planning for the world we want to live in following the war.” In 1944, she observed that many state, county, and township leaders had left the organization to join the armed forces, while others stopped participating due to labor shortages on their farms. She wrote that meetings had been “curtailed and formal leadership training shelved for the duration,” and she anxiously wondered where the IFBF would find future leaders. Nonetheless, Newcomer was hopeful that the Women’s Committee could continue with its programs for rural development, which it did, at the same time taking up the cause of the war effort.<sup>89</sup>

Overall, Newcomer’s columns reflected the policies of the IFBF, which supported the war effort. She urged farm families to be vocal patriots and demand respect as war workers. They should hang service flags in their windows and display their Production Certificate Awards, granted by the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard. Yet she also knew that farm families faced different circumstances from most Americans, and in the face of poor attendance at local meetings, she urged families to remain active in the Farm Bureau in order to advance the place of agriculture in American society. In her February 1942 column she encouraged farmers to continue with their daily routines, despite criticism from non-farmers who did not believe that farmers made viable contributions to the war effort. Quite often, she wrote, when farmers went to register for the draft “with the dust and the tiredness of a day in the field settled on them,” another man would tell them “what chumps they are to be farming instead of grabbing some of this easy defense money.”<sup>90</sup>

Countering such criticism became a common theme in her columns throughout the war years, especially as labor shortages hindered many farmers from meeting increased

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<sup>89</sup> Bess Newcomer, “Marble and Mud,” *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 6, no. 1 (January 1942), 6; Bess Newcomer, “Caught Off Guard!” *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 6, no. 2 (February 1942), 7; Bess Newcomer, “Seasoned Timber,” *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 8, no. 5 (May 1944), 5.

<sup>90</sup> Bess Newcomer, “Caught Off Guard!” *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 6, no. 2 (February 1942), 7

production goals. Although farm workers received draft exemptions and farm families saw a significant increase in income owing to federal policies that regulated prices and production, many problems still remained for agriculture in Iowa. In January 1943 Newcomer criticized federal policies that set production goals but did little to encourage laborers to stay on the farm. She cited examples from across the country where crops went ungathered and animals suffered because there were not enough hands to do the work. Newcomer believed that part of the problem could be alleviated if “farm boys” received greater recognition for their service in the form of an emblem to wear for serving in an “essential war capacity.” Yet such recognition was little consolation in a wartime system where “free enterprise is destroyed because the government determines the storage, distribution, and the price of our products.” In March 1943 she echoed those sentiments. “We know too well,” she wrote, “no amount of prodding (or subsidies either) is going to get the job done if farmers are deprived of the very means of increased production – enough help, enough machinery, fair prices, decent health, and education.”<sup>91</sup>

Newcomer believed that while farmers were willing to do their share in the war effort, they should be wary of increased production goals that could lead to economic disaster during peacetime. As early as 1942, she asked farmers to plan ahead carefully, and she urged the Farm Bureau to begin lobbying for a favorable postwar farm policy, in order to avoid an economic depression like the one that followed World War I. In July 1944 she called on Farm Bureau members to “lead out in after-war planning” and work for a clearly defined postwar plan from the government. She asked, “Why does our government expect us to

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<sup>91</sup> Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land*, 276-279; Bess Newcomer, “Scars and Stars of Agriculture,” *IBF* 7 (January 1943), 9, 17; idem, “Please Pass the Ammunition!” *IBF* 7 (March 1943), 7.

yearly invest in heavy capital and much labor in food production yet have so little to say in sketching the blueprints of the program?” Then, in October 1944, Newcomer warned that if history should repeat itself, and the war should end without a favorable agricultural policy in place, farm families would suffer. To avoid calamity, farm families needed to organize and bring greater attention to their problems. “It is a kind of agricultural suicide,” she wrote, “to ignore or underestimate the securing of prestige that should be accorded farmers and their contribution to America in war or peace.”<sup>92</sup>

Such sentiments echoed IFBF policies, which called for greater recognition of agriculture as a viable war industry. At the 1941 annual convention, the IFBF adopted a resolution declaring that the government must balance the needs of industry, labor, and agriculture to maintain an adequate national defense. Then, at the 1943 annual convention of the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF), some farmers complained that government production demands were unrealistic in light of labor and material shortages, and that industry, which siphoned workers from the countryside, benefited at the expense of farm families. Newcomer reflected these ideas in 1944, when she wrote that farmers needed to “organize” in the same fashion as industrial workers, so that agriculture might reach the “prominence level of industry and labor.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Bess Newcomer, “I Am a Farmer,” *IBF* 8 (July 1944), 3; idem, “Practical Patriotism in War or Peace,” *IBF* 7 (October 1944), 4.

<sup>93</sup> Groves and Thatcher, *The First Fifty*, 109; Bess Newcomer, “I am a Farmer,” *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 8, no. 7 (July 1944), 3. Newcomer often endorsed organization as a means through which farmers might gain the respect of legislators and labor leaders, and this theme was especially prominent in the war years, even when she addressed seemingly unrelated topics; For example, in June 1944, Newcomer wrote an article on education, and mentioned that “if agriculture is ever to take its place alongside industry and labor and be free to organize, to grow and contribute to a higher national standard, it must have good rural education.” See, Bess Newcomer, “Why Educate Farmers?” *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 8, no. 6 (June 1944), 3; Bess Newcomer, “Scars and Stars of Agriculture: 25<sup>th</sup> Convention of AFBF No Wailing Wall,” *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 7, no. 1 (January 1943), 9.



The language in Farm Bureau literature often resembled that of labor unions, and warned farmers that depression would quickly return if they did not consolidate their political voice. A 1944 AFBF pamphlet, “Mission for a Million Farmers,” showed agriculture as a 1918 biplane trailing behind two B-29 Superfortresses, Industry and Labor. The pamphlet asked “On which side of the fence do you want to be?” For non-cooperators, the future was bleak, characterized by rustic living conditions, dilapidated schools, and eroded farm lands. For active Farm Bureau members, however, organization implied modernity; electrification would mean jobs and leisure, better schools would open the “doorway to college” for all farm youth, and conservation programs would ensure rich and productive farms. The IFBF hardly desired a return to normalcy after the war, if such normalcy meant a return to the conditions of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>94</sup>

The IFBFWC also found the war years to be an opportune time to further women’s essential roles in the IFBF. Drawing from growing popular opinion that elevated the status of women in American society, the IFBFWC produced booklets on patriotism and wartime responsibilities. In 1943 the Women’s Committee Handbook was entitled “VICTORY in the Hands of Women,” although it still addressed the standard programs on health, libraries, music, and organization, rather than mobilization on the home front. Promoting the new handbook in her column, Newcomer wrote that the title did not imply that women should dictate the course of war. Rather, farm women could ensure a speedy resolution if they spent “every energy to help produce more food and fiber and, at the same time, keep home and community on an even keel.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> *Mission for a Million Farmers* (Chicago: American Farm Bureau Federation), 1944. IFBF Records.

<sup>95</sup> “VICTORY in the Hands of Farm Women,” Iowa Farm Bureau Federation Women’s Committee Records, Iowa Farm Bureau Federation Records, MS 189, Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State

Talk of the war was present at the women's summer conferences, where in 1942, the women discussed the rationing of canning sugar, their fears for their young sons, and the need to "meet situations that won't stay static," on their farms. By 1943, the number of women in attendance grew to 250, with representatives from ninety counties. Despite wartime concerns, it was still the only "vacation" many women would get from "the million and one little things that are found in the everyday work of a farm wife." That year women met with members of the Women's Land Army, toured the state offices, and met with male leaders to address the question of women's place in the IFBF. The main consensus, however, was that women were still most important in the areas of rural development and membership. They addressed the question once again in 1944, and concluded that women's place in the organization was "anywhere" because they had "stepped in the shoes still warm from the feet of their war-bound men." By the following year, however, the women began to answer that question with increased fervor.<sup>96</sup>

In 1945, the IFBFWC canceled the summer conference in light of wartime shortages and opted instead to hold a series of nine smaller conferences in each district, which District Committee women and Extension leaders who "rode the circuit" attended. A total of 450 farm women attended the nine conferences, where Women's Committee leaders found strong opinions about women's place not only in the IFBF, but also in the postwar world. At one conference in Chariton, Iowa, the women concluded that they had "more to say than they used to have" on issues related to agriculture, legislation, and conservation. They declared that "women are partly to blame for low standards in farm homes of Iowa, with their silly

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University, Ames, Iowa (Hereafter referred to as IFBFWC Records); Bess Newcomer, "Please Pass the Ammunition!" *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 7, no. 3 (March 1943) 7.

<sup>96</sup> Bess Newcomer, "Country Culture Clinic," *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 8, no.8 (August 1944) 5.

martyr-complex making them feel self-righteous using ‘Gay 90’s’ equipment when the farm is highly mechanized.” To this Newcomer added that “*thinking* does not have gender or age,” and women’s activism was essential in maintaining price structure and high incomes.<sup>97</sup>

Iowa Farm Bureau women acted with new vigor in the immediate post-war years. In November 1945, Newcomer wrote that this was the time for increased action, and that no farm family could afford to “sit sunning itself in the false glow of a wartime prosperity.” She challenged the leadership to reach out to farm families and to plan programs with enough depth that they “become part of [farm families] and their bright future.” This may be attributed to their wartime experiences, but is more likely due to their increased levels of organization since 1937, and Sayre’s efforts to recruit and train farm women to be active members.<sup>98</sup>

By 1945, the summer conference had become a regular event, as had separate meetings for women at the IFBF annual conferences in Des Moines. At the IFBF annual conference in 1945, the Women’s Committee chose to focus on programs concerning leadership, world relations, public relations, 4-H clubs, health, and education. Such programs were hardly new to the IFBFWC, but the prosperity of the war years, combined with fears of a post-war depression, prompted them to step up demands for improved standards of living in rural areas.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Bess Newcomer, “Brain Derbies for Farm Women,” *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 9, no. 8 (August 1945) 6. In 1945, wartime shortages also affected the *Iowa Bureau Farmer*. The magazine had to use a smaller size of paper and discontinue using a glossy paper for the cover. “Bureau Farmer Goes to War,” *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 8, no. 4, (April 1944) 5.

<sup>98</sup> Bess Newcomer, “Parable of the Apple Peddlers,” *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 9, no. 11 (November 1945) 4.

<sup>99</sup> Galdys Skelley, “Farm Homemakers Meet,” *IBF* 9 (December 1945), 10.

Newcomer's columns reflected the new energy on the part of the Women's Committee. In October 1946 she wrote that women wanted "more discussion of issues in more township meetings," and they wanted these exchanges to lead to "well-seeded resolutions that can be combined for county resolutions and threshed out for state and national policies." Newcomer's columns continued to focus on specific issues, such as the dangers of inflation and the need to fine tune farm policy in order to ensure better standards of living for farm families. In March 1947 she supported Farm Bureau efforts to ensure the extension of the Steagall Act, a measure passed in 1942 to guarantee wartime price supports for two years following the end of the war. Newcomer stated that legislators needed to prevent an agricultural depression because "it is only fair that farmers, who, year after year, have bent every energy to meet government-set goals in production have every right to expect government-promised supports to be met."<sup>100</sup>

Building and maintaining an active membership consumed the IFBF and the IFBFWC between 1945 and 1950. This was the essential element to achieving the women's goals, as civic improvement usually required local consensus. Membership grew considerably during the war, rising from 40,590 in 1940 to 90,051 in 1945. In 1946, the IFBF set a state quota at 100,000 families, which it achieved by April of that year. In 1947, when membership reached nearly 122,000, the IFBF experienced the largest annual increase in membership since its founding. Available resources do not reveal a specific reason for this increase, but increasing membership numbers could be attributed to a number of causes.

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<sup>100</sup> Bess Newcomer, "Independent... and Broke," *IBF* 10 (October 1946), 7; idem, "Gnats and Camels," *IBF* 11 (March 1947), 20-21. For more on the Steagall Act, see *The United States Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, 1925-1998: Members, Jurisdiction, and History* (Washington, D.C., 1998), chapt. 5, "War, Peace, and Prosperity, 1940-1959." See also, Virgil W. Dean, *An Opportunity Lost: The Truman Administration and the Farm Policy Debate* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006).

Radio broadcasts, as well as better roads and automobiles, allowed Farm Bureau women to initiate more extensive membership drives. Fears of a postwar depression may have prompted many farm families to become politically active. The greater availability of cash incomes for farm families may have also allowed more families to afford dues.<sup>101</sup>

Regardless of the reasons for growth, Newcomer often reminded her readers that increased membership did not necessarily imply a stronger organization. In April 1946 she wrote that “We should be concerned that our organization be fine-textured as well as big.” If women had regular meetings without a strong action plan, she believed, they were acting only as a social club and would fail to make use of opportunities in the Farm Bureau. She was very critical of women who did not take advantage of the public forums the IFBF offered to express their concerns for agricultural, political, and social issues. Again, in November 1946, she reminded leaders that “we cannot afford to let this rich gift of voluntary leadership gather dust on the shelf.” The membership numbers do not indicate how many more women became active in the post-war years, but the increased energy of the IFBFWC indicates that they surely benefited from the trend.<sup>102</sup>

In 1947, the Women’s Committee experienced another change in leadership. During the summer conference, Sayre announced her election to the presidency of the Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW), and resigned her IFBFWC chairmanship. The committee appointed Amanda “Peg” Eliason, the Seventh District Committeewoman from Letts, Iowa to serve the remaining three years of Sayre’s term. Because Sayre’s programs

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<sup>101</sup> Robert L. Tontz, “Memberships of General Farmers’ Organizations, United States, 1974-1960,” *Agricultural History* 38, no. 3 (1964): 156; *Official Bulletin of the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation*, (October 1945), 1; ( May 1946), 1; (April 1947), 1.

<sup>102</sup> Bess Newcomer, “The Leaven and the Lump,” *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 9, no 4 (April 1946), 14; Bess Newcomer, “New Blood in Our Veins,” *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 9, no. 11 (November 1946), 9.

were well established and had the support of the committeewomen, the transition in leadership once again appeared seamless. Delegates at the summer conference elected to continue the 1947 programs into 1948 with the only change being to expand programs on international relations, perhaps because through Sayre they would strengthen their alliance with the ACWW. In addition to continuing their contributions to the Pennies for Friendship campaign, they called for studies of various countries and trade policies, as well as the designation of International Relations Chairmen at the township level. Otherwise, the women's program continued to promote leadership, homemaking, youth programs, health, safety, and recreation.<sup>103</sup>

Under the leadership of Eliason, who had earned a degree from Northwestern University and taught music in public schools for several years before marrying, education took center stage. Eliason promoted a scholarship program that funded college educations for rural youth interested in becoming teachers, and she sponsored educational radio broadcasts for women. School consolidation became the central issue in 1946, and with it came debates on taxes, rural roads, libraries, and school lunches. According to IFBF member Ellen Hartnett, 40 percent of rural children never reached high school, and of those who did, only 43 percent graduated, while 85 percent of urban children attended high school and 65 percent graduated. Hartnett believed that rural people avoided the issue because reorganization would mean higher taxes to support the required facilities, roads, and personnel, but she argued that

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<sup>103</sup> Groves and Thatcher, *The First Fifty*, 58; "F.B. Women Set 1948 Goals," *Official Bulletin of the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation* (July 1947) 1.

once they began to lobby for school consolidation, tax laws would also change and the state would improve rural roads.<sup>104</sup>

In 1948, Newcomer called for the immediate reorganization of rural schools, despite roads and tax laws, because while the rural high schools were struggling to retain pupils, they lost tuition monies to schools in towns, overcrowded with rural students seeking better opportunities. She argued that rural people could not be realistic about maintaining fledgling rural schools as long as they sent their children to town for quality high school educations. Education was a central part of all IFBFWC programs, and members continued to work on reorganization through the 1950s.<sup>105</sup>

By the late 1940s, women no longer questioned whether or not they were an integral part of the organization, though they continued to reaffirm their place. In 1946, Newcomer recognized that women faced limitations with the organization and they shaped IFBF policies only indirectly. Rather than blaming men, she attributed women's limitations to the unstable state of agriculture. Farm women shared in the work of their husbands, and therefore in the business of farming. "In short," she wrote, "WE BELONG." Although their work was considered gender appropriate and they did not challenge traditional gender roles, women of

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<sup>104</sup> *Annual Report for Progress*, Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, 1950. Iowa Farm Bureau Federation Records, MS 105, Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa. The IFBFWC began monthly broadcasts on the Ames radio station WOI in April 1948. On the first Tuesday of every month, as part of the show "the Women's Forum," hosted by Martha Duncan, the District Committeewomen took turns planning and presenting the programs. In their first broadcast, presented by Mrs. C.C. Inman of the Second District, the women first recognized the special and rare opportunity for homemakers to "approach a 'live' microphone," and then outlined their plans to petition for rural health. The next show in May, presented by Christine Floyd Dittmer of the First District, included a discussion on world trade. See, "On the Air!! Farm Bureau Women Stage Radio Shows Over WOI Each Month," *Iowa Bureau Farmer*, 11, no. 5 (May 1948) 32.

By 1950, the IFBFWC had given scholarships to seventy-two students to become teachers; Ellen Hartnett, "Are You Ready For Action on School Program?" *Official Bulletin of the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation*, October 1946, 2. That year the Women's Committee celebrated one small step toward school improvement when Congress approved the National School Lunch Program, sponsored by the Department of Agriculture. Not only did the program guarantee nutritious meals for children from low-income families, but it also provided new markets for agricultural produce.

<sup>105</sup> Bess Newcomer, "Rustic Ruminations," *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 11, no. 9 (September 1948) 15.

the IFBFWC demanded that farm women be active in their communities and take sincere interest in agricultural issues. Sayre, for example, continually put down the idea of allowing IFBF queen contests, though the subject often surfaced at Executive Committee meetings. She argued that the time and energy required to promote such a contest would be more useful elsewhere, and thus such a contest was never approved. The women took their roles as educators and social reformers quite seriously, and through the IFBF learned leadership and organizational skills they may not have acquired otherwise.<sup>106</sup>

Yet as they worked to ensure a bright future for agriculture in Iowa, the women of the Farm Bureau expressed notions of class within the farming occupation. The most striking example of this was the Women's Committee support for Farm Bureau resolutions aimed at reducing tenancy and promoting owner-operated farms as the ideal. In 1937, as a response to increased rates of tenancy in hard economic times, W.W. Waymack wrote that the standard one-year leases conflicted with governmental and IFBF initiatives to conserve soil and resources, and that a continuation of the trends toward tenancy would create a "peasant class" among farmers. At the IFBF annual convention 1943, the membership passed a resolution that stated, "The 65,000 Farm Bureau members throughout the state are largely family-type farm operators. They have a real appreciation for the soundness of a policy objective which would extend to themselves and others the virtues of owner-operatorship." Again, their primary concern was the likelihood of another post-war depression, and the idea that tenant farms allowed the unemployed to take up farming. They vigorously opposed any "back-to-the-farm" movements, which "might be disastrous to all phases of our economy." Policies

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<sup>106</sup> Bess Newcomer, "She Married a Farmer," *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 9, no. 8 (August 1946) 8; McDonald, *Ruth Buxton Sayre*, 59.



such as these put the IFBF at odds with other farm organizations, most notably, the Iowa Farmers' Union, which had for decades accused the IFBF of placing corporate interests over those of farmers.<sup>107</sup>

At the same time, however, women in the two organizations shared the common struggle to define roles as members. Women in the IFU operated through an auxiliary, and shared no committees with the male leadership. In the March 1942 issue of the *Iowa Union Farmer*, IFU member Vera McCrea wrote:

Back of practically every man who speaks up in a meeting stands a woman who has encouraged him to take an active part in the affairs of his organization. . . . Back of practically every member who does not attend meetings, or who, if he does, do so perfunctorily and without interest, stands a woman who says: 'Oh, what's the use? Why bother?'

As in the IFBF, women in the IFU considered their membership important as a supportive measure and as demonstrative of their interest in furthering agriculture. They may have differed significantly in their views of government programs and farm tenancy, but as farm women they claimed a stake as essential contributors.<sup>108</sup>

During the 1950s, the lives and responsibilities of farm women changed tremendously. They adopted labor-saving appliances, gardened less, abandoned dairy and egg production, and exchanged their roles as producers for roles as consumers and business partners. In keeping with the post-war resurgence of the feminine ideal in the United States, in 1949, the *Iowa Bureau Farmer* introduced a new section in the magazine entitled, "The Bureau Farmer's Wife." The section included such articles of specific interest to women as

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<sup>107</sup> W.W. Waymack, "The Land Tennancy Problem Gets National Attention," *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 1, no. 1 (January 1937) 5; See, Dale Kramer, *The Truth About the Farm Bureau*, (St.Paul: Farmers' Book Store, 1938); "Resolutions, 1920-1951," IFBF Records.

<sup>108</sup> Vera McCrea, "Ladies Make the Wheel Go Round," *Iowa Union Farmer* (Columbus Junction, Iowa, 22 March 1941) 3.

family issues, clothing, food, and other information about the home and family that closely resembled the women's programs from the 1920s. Newcomer's articles, which had previously been featured in the opening pages, were nestled in amongst articles on news of the IFBFWC and other women's issues. This was not imposed upon the Farm Bureau women by male editors, however, but rather came about through the efforts of Marjorie Burke, who worked through the Information Department to publicize women's activities.

The emergence of a women's section in the *Iowa Bureau Farmer* was consistent with trends in Extension publications and agricultural periodicals during the 1950s. Historian Katherine Jellison has illustrated how during this period extension agents, advertisers, and journalists increasingly promoted new technologies by promising farm women a lifestyle similar to that of urban women. Farm wives could be free from the drudgery of farm life, enjoy abundant free time, and become "homemakers," thanks to indoor plumbing, electricity, washing machines, refrigerators, telephones, and countless new appliances available in the postwar period. Yet Jellison also found that while farm women welcomed these new technologies, they resisted idealized images and notions that they should retreat into a life of leisure disconnected from the business of the farm. Rather, farm women often became involved in managing the business of the farm, or they took jobs in town to secure a cash income.<sup>109</sup>

By the 1950s, farm women could find greater options between purchasing and producing, as well as the ability to make more personal choices. For example, they could can their own produce or buy pre-packaged food; they could choose whether to buy or make

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<sup>109</sup> Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

clothes. They could choose whether they would perform dairy and poultry work, or whether they would find off-farm work to procure an additional cash income. Having a wider range of options did not appear to keep women from associating with their husbands' profession and taking an active interest in agricultural issues. In 1950, for example, the IFBFWC launched a massive educational campaign on the eradication of Brucellosis, a disease that affected livestock and humans. Their efforts earned them a resolution at the 1950 Annual Meeting, in which the IFBF "commended" the women for their work.<sup>110</sup>

Then, in 1958, when the IFBFWC sent a group of sixty-seven farm women to Washington, D.C. in 1958, they told Congressman Fred Schwengel:

Most of the tractors on our farms are 'lady broke.' We know what is being planted in the northeast '40' this spring and we know whether or not the new alfalfa seeding came through the winter. We know what it is to be tired and discouraged and the next thing to broke, but we also know the thrill of being close to nature; of working with animals; of producing with our own hands...<sup>111</sup>

Similarly, although the editors of the *Iowa Bureau Farmer* relegated women's issues to a special section of the magazine, the policies and practices of the IFBFWC show that it still considered women central to the overall organization. In 1953 the Women's Committee operated on a budget of nearly \$30,000, more than twice what the Farm Bureau allocated to either the Legislative, Research, or Youth Departments. In 1955, after the IFBFWC chairwoman Christine Inman overheard an implement dealer refuse to tell women the prices of farm machinery because it would "scare" them, she wrote, "Farm women are aware of costs and prices in their close partnership in the family farm business and they have a great deal of influence as to how the farm income is spent." Women from the general membership

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<sup>110</sup> *Resolutions, 1921-1950*, IFBF Records.

<sup>111</sup> "Women's Point of View," *Spokesman* 24, no 37 (3 May 1958) 2.

who often wrote letters to the IFBF President, E. Howard Hill, as well as to the editor of the *Iowa Farm Bureau Spokesman*, also expressed concerns for agricultural policies. Throughout the 1950s, women wrote letters on the importance of soil conservation, as well as on the problems associated with agricultural surpluses and the need for price controls. They criticized political leaders for failing to act in the face of an economic downturn, and they suggested IFBF resolutions related to politics and agriculture.<sup>112</sup>

The 1950s marked yet another important transition within the organization. Ruth Sayre and the committee women who helped develop programs in the 1930s and 1940s either retired or moved on to other organizations. They did not entirely leave the organization behind, however, and they often reflected on changes within the IFBFWC, sometimes noting that the current women leaders did not have the same energy or desire to improve rural life. As she ended her stint as a writer for the *Iowa Bureau Farmer*, Newcomer seemed to become more dismayed with agricultural trends toward large, mechanized farms. In her final column, in October 1950, she commented that many farmers could not keep up with demands for modernization and that farmers should “discard the fallacy that the most improved farm is the one with the biggest collection of merchandise.”<sup>113</sup>

Even after Newcomer resigned her position as the Eighth District Committeewomen because her husband, Ralph, suffered a stroke and required constant care, she retained an interest in rural and agricultural issues, and a sentimental attachment to the IFBFWC, simply

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<sup>112</sup> Christine Inman, “How Do You Decide Whether Money Goes Into Farm Machinery or Home?” *Iowa Farm Bureau Spokesman* 21 (30 April 1955), 12 (hereafter cited as *Spokesman*); See also Ruth van Alstine to E. Howard Hill, 4 October 1955, E. Howard Hill Papers, RS 21/7/4, University Archives, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames; *Spokesman* 22 (5 November 1955), 2; *ibid.* 22 (24 March 1955) 4; *ibid.* 23 (13 October 1956), 4; *ibid.* 23 (22 September 1956), 4; *ibid.* 26 (29 August 1960), 4; *ibid.* 28 (18 November 1961), 4. The *Iowa Farm Bureau Spokesman* replaced the *Iowa Bureau Farmer* as the official organizational publication in 1953.

<sup>113</sup> Bess Newcomer, “Rustic Ruminations,” *Iowa Bureau Farmer* 13, no. 10 (October 1950) 22.

shifting her activism from state to local activities. Throughout the 1950s and 1960, she became involved with the local school board and tax conference, which she found to be a “good proving ground” for her “basic Farm Bureau beliefs.” Overall, her experiences illustrate how the IFBFWC consistently promoted rural women’s activism and how the women in the organization helped set a precedent for women’s involvement in agricultural issues in Iowa<sup>114</sup>

Between 1921 and 1951, the IFBFWC offered Iowa farm women opportunities to become involved in the organization and within their communities. Yet the IFBFWC’s activities and policies also evolved over time to address the changing needs of farm women. During the 1920s, the Iowa Farm Bureau emphasized homemaking activities for women that eventually led to greater social and political activism between 1937 and 1950. During those years the IFBFWC consolidated its statewide efforts through standard handbooks, summer conferences, and articles in the *Iowa Bureau Farmer*. Under the leadership of Ruth Sayre, Iowa Farm Bureau women drew on their experiences of economic hardship, especially during the Great Depression, to demand higher standards of living in rural areas. The challenge for the next decade was for the IFBFWC to sustain and build on the groundwork that had been established, and to decide whether to develop new programs or continue what seemed to work.

Several factors precipitated the shift from practical activities to social and political activism, including new technologies and higher expectations for standards of living. Because most farms lacked electricity, running water, and other amenities, the women saw

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<sup>114</sup> Newcomer to Sayre, December 1952, Ruth Buxton Sayre Papers, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.

rural conditions as inferior to urban standards. In 1930, only 24 percent of rural homes in Iowa had indoor plumbing, and only 21.4 percent were wired for electricity. Even by 1945, only 31 had indoor plumbing and 58 percent had electricity. For the Farm Bureau women, these conditions raised important questions regarding rural health, safety, and education. They believed there was a definite need for their activism, and the women considered their work in expanding social programs as essential to the IFBF mission to better farm living.<sup>115</sup>

During these same years, the women's club movement reached its peak in the United States, the farm women of the IFBFWC, like their urban, middle-class counterparts, found civic and political power, as well as important social networks, through organization. Throughout the 1920s, the IFBFWC worked closely with members of the Federated Women's Clubs of Iowa, a largely urban organization, who worked on civic improvements and political issues. Farm Bureau women sought to recreate such activism in the countryside. In 1937, Sayre declared that it was "not enough today for a woman to cook and bake and sew." If women organized as community housekeepers who worked for the betterment of agriculture and rural life, they would "radiate a power and a strength that stretches far beyond our individual horizons."<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power, Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963* (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 154; *Agricultural Statistics* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, United States Printing Office, 1945) 410 – 411.

<sup>116</sup> *IFBM* 5, no. 3 (November 1923); *IFBM* 6, no. 6 (February 1925); Peter Hoehnle, "Iowa Clubwomen Rise to World Stage: Dorothy Houghton and Ruth Sayre," *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* (Spring 2002) 44; Ruth Buxton Sayre, "Partners in Progress," Iowa Farm Bureau Federation Administrative Report, 1937, 23, 24, Iowa Farm Bureau Federation Records, MS 105, Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa. (Hereafter referred to as IFBF Records).

The IFBFWC operated as a functioning committee, not an auxiliary of the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation. Delegates from nine districts elected the nine members of the committee, and the chairwoman served as a voting member of the IFBF executive committee. Women were also very active on the local levels. The role of vice-president was usually reserved for women at the county and township to ensure women's participation.

In contrast, the Women's Auxiliary of the Iowa Farmer's Union actually opposed association with urban women's clubs on the grounds that wealthy urban women used their political clout to dictate government policy. One of their official purposes as an auxiliary was to "counteract the influence of Women's Clubs and other reactionary groups who are working for themselves and not for farmers." In May 1931, Lillie Blumgren, a member of the Women's Auxiliary, wrote that the Extension workers were the product of "eastern capitalists and politicians" who passed rural legislation at the suggestion of city club women. She concluded by demanding that the ladies of the IFU "develop a class consciousness," and to develop a "real farm women's organization" that would truly fight for agriculture. Yet for most Iowa farm women, this rhetoric did not appear to draw them to the IFU and this organization did not enjoy the same membership numbers as did the Farm Bureau. Perhaps, it was their desire to reach wide audiences, rural as well as urban, that enabled the Farm Bureau women to gain greater mass appeal. Though well educated and exceptional in their leadership experiences, women leaders at the state level spoke and wrote in terms of what common people could do to solve problems.<sup>117</sup>

This should not to imply that there were no successful alternatives to the models of leadership and training school systems of the IFBFWC. In Nebraska, members of the Associated Women of the Nebraska Farm Bureau Federation (AWNFBF) were also closely associated with the Extension Service and they utilized a "local leader" program, similar to the training school system. In many parts of the state, however, particularly in the west, travel could be difficult and resources scarce, making it difficult to form women's clubs with the same organizational consistency as was done in Iowa. Before 1928, the Nebraska

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<sup>117</sup> *Iowa Union Farmer*, 14, vol. 8 (20 May 1931).

legislature appropriated just \$3,500 per year to each county for Extension work. This amount only covered the expenses for one agent, including salary, transportation, and administrative support. Counties could hire two agents if private donations provided the salary of the second agent, but this was often too expensive for most county Farm Bureaus and by 1928, only two counties, Cass and Custer, had their own home demonstration agents. Most counties, then, hired only male agents to oversee projects for farmers, though some male agents occasionally organized women's activities. Without the benefit of a full-time home demonstration agent to organize and run meetings, Nebraska Farm Bureau women depended even more on local leaders to establish clubs and oversee activities.<sup>118</sup>

Officially organized on 15 July 1920, the Nebraska Farm Bureau Federation consolidated existing county organizations and provided financial support for Extension activities, just as it was done in Iowa. The greatest difference between the two states, however, was the relationship between the Extension Service and the Farm Bureau. While county agents welcomed the assistance of county Farm Bureau, Nebraska Extension Director W.H. Brokaw instructed agents to avoid involving themselves in such Farm Bureau activities as membership drives, commercial sales, or cooperative ventures. Historian Floyd H. Rodine argued that during the 1920s, both Extension work and the Farm Bureau struggled to secure a permanent place in Nebraska. Rodine believed that the main obstacle was the presence of a strong Farmers' Union, whose members had already established cooperatives and favored minimal taxes. For this reason, Farmers' Union members often led the opposition against counties appropriating funds for Extension Work. Rodine further argued that a service

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<sup>118</sup> W.H. Brokaw, *Annual Report of Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics* (1928), 89-91, Nebraska State Cooperative Extension Annual Reports, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Special Collections, Lincoln, Nebraska (Hereafter cited as NSCEAR).



organization that favored gradual political change had little appeal to Nebraska farmers. With membership dues as high as ten dollars throughout the 1920s, Rodine believed the Farm Bureau was out of reach for many farmers while “it showed no immediate promise of crossing the farmers palm with silver.”<sup>119</sup>

Though it boasted over 20,000 members in 1921, the Nebraska Farm Bureau Federation struggled throughout the decade to maintain a strong state-wide membership. During the winter of 1920 and 1921, leaders launched a massive membership campaign hoping to secure 65,000 members. They brought in “professional organizers” from out-of-state to launch a “big brass band campaign,” but the results only left the organization in financial dire straits. Approximately 27,000 new members pledged, but many of the professional organizers sold memberships on a “deferred payment system,” which more than 6,000 members never paid. At the end of the campaign, in the spring of 1921, the Nebraska Farm Bureau was far short of its goal, with just 20,618 members and organizations in forty-two of ninety-three counties. Their failure to garner more members created a financial crisis for the state organization, and by the mid-1920s, leaders of the Nebraska Farm Bureau began to favor organizing at the local levels so as to divert some of the risk from the state organization.<sup>120</sup>

Just as the Extension Service and the Farm Bureau did not find immediate success, so too did women’s activities struggle to become integrated into the greater organization. During the 1920s, there were just five Home Economics specialists to oversee all of the women’s activities in the forty counties that had organized Farm Bureaus. Beginning in the

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<sup>119</sup> Floyd H. Rodine, “The Farm Bureau in Nebraska, 1920-1950,” (Dissertation, University of Nebraska – Lincoln, 1952), 32, 38-39, 67.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 54-58, 68.

early 1920s, each specialist was assigned a number of counties and held meetings in those counties one day every month for seven or eight months out of the year. At the monthly meetings, the specialists trained representatives from local clubs, though unlike the clubs in Iowa, Nebraska women had little choice in selecting the lessons or the programs. In 1928, W.H. Brokaw, the director of the Nebraska Extension Service, noted that the State Leader of women's activities attempted to schedule annual projects in order to ensure that if some women were dissatisfied with one year's program, they might enjoy the next. Brokaw believed this system of assigning projects, rather than allowing the women to choose, lowered costs and gave "better satisfaction" to all parties involved because "voting upon the choice of projects sometimes left unhappy conditions for even the women in a club would not agree among themselves." Ultimately, however, Brokaw believed that the women understood this policy was designed to conserve resources. He concluded, "The women realize that travel expenses must be kept as low as possible," and that "they are fortunate if any one of the projects can come to their county."<sup>121</sup>

Despite such limitations of choice and inadequate resources, some local leaders appeared to exercise considerable independence in planning a number of activities. In 1921, for example, the women of Buffalo County, located in south-central Nebraska, used their newly formed women's clubs to promote public health education. In March, working in conjunction with the Extension Service, the State Teacher's College in Kearney, Nebraska, the Kearney City Schools, the County Superintendent of Public Instruction, and the Ravenna Women's Club, a small-town organization, the Farm Bureau women sponsored county-wide activities to educate children about health. One of these events included a two-day visit from

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

Cho-Cho, the Health Clown from the Children's Health Organization of New York City.

Over those two days, county agent John E. Ludden estimated that Cho-Cho entertained more than 5,000 children and adults with a show that included "cows that converse on milk values and his stage farmers who hymn on the virtues of eggs and oatmeal." This was followed by a serious "brimstone and health-fire against fried food, young ladies who eat chocolate between meals... and boys and girls who scorn their parents' wishes and stay up until after 8 o'clock at night." The Farm Bureau women built on Cho-Cho's appearance by hosting a home demonstration agent, Miss Sturdevant, who spent five days before the show giving demonstrations on health issues. Then, for three days following Cho-Cho's show, another agent, Miss Murphy, gave demonstrations entitled "The Family Medicine Cabinet," "Home Nursing," "Emergencies," and "The Care and Feeding of Children."<sup>122</sup>

Though this public health project required considerable effort, in 1921 the Farm Bureau women of Buffalo County also made time for programs featuring garment-making, sewing machine attachments, and dress-form construction. Home demonstration agents spent just five days instructing women in the county that year, but county agent John Ludden had ample praise for the local leaders and their "corps of helpers" who kept the women's clubs "busy most of the summer and fall." Overall, Ludden estimated that the women had constructed 110 dress forms, though he did not indicate the total number of women involved.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> J.E. Ludden, "Report of the County Agricultural Agent from December 1, 1920 to December 1, 1921," (Buffalo County, Nebraska, 1921), 12-13; "Cho-Cho Draws One of the Largest Crowds Ever Seen in City," undated news clipping, included in J.E. Ludden, "Report of the County Agricultural Agent from December 1, 1920 to December 1, 1921," (Buffalo County, Nebraska, 1921).

<sup>123</sup> J.E. Ludden, "Report of the County Agricultural Agent from December 1, 1920 to December 1, 1921," (Buffalo County, Nebraska, 1921), 14-15.

In 1928, W.H. Brokaw, the director of the Nebraska Extension Service, expressed concern that women's activities were not more widespread, but he was also optimistic. Congress had passed the Capper-Ketcham Act, which provided greater federal funding to states for Extension programs specifically targeting women and children. The Capper-Ketcham Act not only gave a boost to home economics programs, but also 4-H and other children's programs. The additional funds made it possible for more Nebraska counties to hire "Assistant Agents," or home demonstration agents, to better organize work for women. The effects were immediate. In 1927 and 1928, the Extension Service recorded that there were 475 clubs throughout the state with 7,089 members. By June 1929, 8,487 women were members of clubs, and eleven counties had full-time home demonstration agents. Furthermore, statistics the Extension Service collected illustrated that women remained fairly busy with Extension activities. For example, in 1929, 1,726 women from 117 clubs in eight counties participated in clothing construction programs, making a total of 6,407 garments. Other clubs worked on projects pertaining to saving time on laundry, building leadership, and school lunch programs, engaging more than 8,000 women from forty counties.<sup>124</sup>

Still, organizing Farm Bureaus and women's clubs could be difficult in more remote areas, or where roads and transportation networks had not been completely developed. By 1933, only forty-three, or less than half of all Nebraska counties had established Farm Bureaus to sponsor Extension Service activities. Most of these were located in the eastern and south-central areas of the state, with only a handful of organized counties located in the sparsely populated north-central and panhandle regions. For example, in 1920 and 1921,

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<sup>124</sup> W.H. Brokaw, *Annual Report of Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics* (1929), 107-140, NSCEAR.

during the first state-wide membership drive, an article in the *Nebraska Farm Bureau Review* reported that the Farm Bureau would not even attempt to canvass twenty counties with “sparse population.” And in 1931, Beaman Q. Smith, the county agent in Frontier County, located in southwestern Nebraska, found “women’s work is hard to put across on account of the bad roads and canyons.” Smith expressed frustration at the fact that the women of Frontier County were interested in Extension activities, but they actually joined clubs in neighboring counties where they enjoyed easier access to trade centers. In the end, Smith concluded that interest alone could not guarantee membership. “It is a matter of convenience and economy with such clubs,” he wrote.<sup>125</sup>

Within two decades, however, the Associated Women of the Nebraska Farm Bureau Federation (AWNFBF) and Extension homemakers’ clubs enjoyed considerable growth, mirroring the developments that occurred in Iowa. By 1953, the Council of Home Extension Clubs in Nebraska estimated that it reached 21,939 members of 1,416 clubs in eighty-seven counties across the state. And like the IFBFWC, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, the members of the AWNFBF considered themselves “a united voice for Nebraska farm women,” with programs to address issues such as rural health, soils, civic responsibilities, pending legislation related to agriculture, and producer-consumer relations.<sup>126</sup>

Another alternative to the Farm Bureau women’s clubs formed in Iowa and Nebraska, were clubs for women that focused most of their efforts on the production and marketing of poultry and dairy products. The Women’s Progressive Farm Association (WPFA), for example, was one of the first state-wide farm women’s organization in Missouri and served

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<sup>125</sup> *Nebraska Farm Bureau Review* (8 January 1921), 4; Beaman Q. Smith, “Report of the County Agricultural Agent from December 1, 1930 to December 1, 1931,” (Frontier County, Nebraska, 1921), 18-19.

<sup>126</sup> Neve Scarborough, *History of the Associated Country Women of the World* (London: John Wadsworth, Ltd. The Rydall Press, 1953), 370-372.

as a division of the Missouri Farmer's Association (MFA), a cooperative marketing organization. Like the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, the MFA grew out of a desire to consolidate the county and township farm clubs that formed throughout the state during the early 1910s. In 1917, William Hirth, editor of the *Missouri Farmer*, called for a statewide farmers' conference and the creation of a state organization to oversee these county and school district farm clubs so that they might better cooperate and manage their resources. Four years later, in August 1921, the women of the MFA also consolidated their county organizations by creating the WPFA at the annual state convention. Following the election of state officers, members of the WPFA and MFA staged an elaborate ceremony to celebrate the founding of this new women's group. The highlight of the event was a mock wedding of MFA President G.O. Reid and his wife, who represented the WPFA, to symbolize the union between the two organizations.<sup>127</sup>

By the time of the annual MFA convention in 1922, WPFA membership had increased from 112 women in two counties, and scattered townships in other parts of the

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<sup>127</sup> Because they developed at the same time, organizers of the MFA and of the Missouri Farm Bureau Federation (MFBF) experienced considerable tension. Just as in Iowa, the state cooperative extension service depended on county farm bureaus to finance agents and their activities in local areas. During the spring and summer of 1912, the first extension agents began working in Pettis and Cape Girardeau Counties, and in 1915, representative from thirteen counties met to form the MFBF. William Hirth, though he desired to organize farmers across the state, expressed much dismay at the policies of the farm bureaus and the extension service that intended to "put farming on a 'more systematic business basis.'" In May 1917, he argued that farmers should look for extension agents for practical advice, but farmers should also define for themselves what was "systematic" and on a "business basis." Hirth believed that the extension service and farm bureaus should avoid matters of farm business, and that members of MFA farm clubs, as they created cooperatives, saved "tens of thousands of dollars in the buying of mill feed, flour, corn, hay, oats, cotton, seed meal and cake, linseed oil meal, coal, potatoes, fertilizers," and other supplies.

Though members of both organizations made several attempts to cooperate and reconcile. In January 1921, leaders of the two organizations signed what was known as the "Peace Treaty." This agreement provided that the MFBF would refrain from marketing and purchasing activities, restricting its purpose to purely educational pursuits. The "Peace Treaty," proved ineffective, however, and conflicts over the selling and purchasing activities, as well as other business ventures of the MFBF, persisted throughout the century.

See Raymond A. Young, *Cultivating Cooperation: A History of the Missouri Farmers Association* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 41-45, 56-57.

state, to 3,500 members from twenty-seven counties. In January 1923, membership reached 5,000 and leaders set the goal of 25,000 by the following August. This may have been somewhat ambitious, however, and even by 1950, membership had increased but remained around 6,150 members.<sup>128</sup>

Beginning in 1923, state leaders developed programs for local groups by publishing outlines and suggestions in a small booklet for local program committees. The 1924 program revealed that members of the WPFA, or at least the state leaders, wished to emphasize organizational and agricultural programs over those pertaining to the home and family. Suggested programs included lessons on maintaining membership, farm beautification, building community, supporting local churches and schools, and working with the state government, but the majority of the programs emphasized agricultural production. None of the suggested programs addressed traditional topics, such as clothing, nutrition, or child care. One unit on horticulture provided detailed information on the maintenance of orchard crops, while another encouraged women to establish community hatcheries and incorporate with neighbors as non-profit, community co-operative egg hatching organizations. Women could also learn about bee keeping, new canning techniques, and the latest technology for producing high quality eggs and cream. Though the members of the WPFA believed strongly in building community and promoting appropriate gender roles for men and women, these

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<sup>128</sup> *WPFA History 1921-1977: Compiled from State Secretaries' Minutes*, ed. Mrs. Earl Borchers, Women's Progressive Farmers Association of Missouri, Inc. (Cole Camp, MO: Williams Press, 1978), 1-7, Women's Progressive Farm Association of Missouri, Inc., Records, 1921-1985, C3726, Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, Columbia, Missouri (hereafter cited as WPFA Records); "History of the WPFA," and "A Sketch of the Bona Fide Farm Men and Women," in *W.P.F.A. Bulletin* 1 (June 1923), 5-8, in WPFA Records; "Comparative Schedule of Paid Memberships," Secretary's books, 1950-1951, WPFA Records.

programs also illustrate that the WPFA wished to emphasize women's roles as producers and marketers.<sup>129</sup>

The WPFA's annual bulletin, for example, not only informed women how to build and sustain membership, but also how to produce superior eggs, poultry products, and dairy products, especially cream. In 1924, Mrs. Lincoln Haseltine of Greene County urged members to improve the quality of their cream in order to increase prices and set higher standards of quality for consumers. Haseltine wrote, "To the shame of Missouri farm women it is known that our great state stands very far down on the list of cream producing territory not in quantity but in quality... If you can form an organization of your local clubs and insist that every body in that organization produce cream of a high quality you will be in a position to command the highest price." She then went on to suggest a variety of techniques for improving quality, and she also suggested a number of Extension and scientific publications that would help women produce better products.<sup>130</sup>

Overall, the women of the WPFA projected a highly professional vision of farm women, using their organization to not only market products, but also to sell items to farm women. In 1924, for example, the WPFA entered into an agreement with the Dixie Canner Company of Little Rock, Arkansas, to not only sell canners and pressure cookers to farm women, but also to set up demonstrations on how to use them. The state association received a commission of 20 percent, and the county organizations received commissions of 5 percent on all sales. Ventures like this were possible because unlike the women of the IFBFWC, members of the WPFA received a small contribution from the MFA, but did not depend

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<sup>129</sup> "Programs of the Women's Progressive Farmers Association of Missouri," (1924), 1-18, WPFA Records.

<sup>130</sup> Mrs. Lincoln Haseltine, "The Care of Cream," *W.P.F.A. Bulletin* 2 (June 1924), 39-42, WPFA Records.



entirely on the main organization for financial allocations and operating expenses. The WPFA retained all of its revenue and enjoyed abundant financial resources from its very beginning. In 1922, for example, the WPFA accrued more than \$3,600 from membership dues and fundraising efforts. This income enabled the organization to pay the officers' expenses. All officers received reimbursements of six cents per mile, or full railroad fare, in order to travel to board meetings, as well as a dollar for each day officers acted in the service of the WPFA. This was extremely unique, since most women's organizations required officers and members to pay their own expenses. Yet the WPFA enjoyed an income generated by membership dues and fundraisers that also covered the costs of printing and stationary, stamps and postage, a typewriter, other costs of maintaining an office, and hiring a secretary. Overall, in 1922, the WPFA paid its officers \$1045.24, with the highest allocation of \$196.98, going to the president, Mrs. George Reed, of Springfield, Missouri. Furthermore, the budget allowed the organization to provide prizes and rewards for the local clubs that recruited the greatest number of new members.<sup>131</sup>

Because it was involved in various businesses and it maintained its own budget, by 1928, the WPFA, incorporated as the Women's Progressive Farm Organization of Missouri, Inc. By then, the receipts from membership dues and fundraisers reached \$5, 804.42, and the organization enjoyed a hefty surplus. The president, Mrs. Bert Hooper received \$543.45 to cover her expenses, and of the twenty-five state officers, nine received more than \$100, six received more than \$150, and 3 received more than \$200. This not only indicates that state

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<sup>131</sup> *WPFA History 1921-1977: Compiled from State Secretaries' Minutes*, ed. Mrs. Earl Borchers, Women's Progressive Farmers Association of Missouri, Inc. (Cole Camp, MO: Williams Press, 1978), 8; "Statement of Receipts and Disbursements for period August 25, 1922 – July 10, 1923," George E. McCarthy, Chief Auditor (Columbia, MO: MFA Auditing Department, 1923), WPFA Records. During the 1930s, when the WPFA lost members due to the economic crisis, the officers voted to reduce their reimbursements for travel and to do away with the \$1 per diem.

officers traveled extensively and spent considerable time working for the organization, but also that women involved with the WPFA at the state level could justify their involvement as an opportunity to gain experience and influence policy without using family resources.<sup>132</sup>

In many ways, however, the WPFA was remarkably similar to the IFBFWC and the AWNFBF. Just like these organizations, the women of the MFA began organizing local, township clubs during the late 1910's, before these were consolidated into the WPFA in 1921. Members of the WPFA also used similar rhetoric to those in Iowa and Nebraska in order to justify their activities. Female leaders firmly believed the WPFA worked in cooperation with, not as an auxiliary to the MFA. At the annual state convention in August 1921, the founding members of the WPFA presented their credentials and the proposal to establish a "co-operative state-wide organization of farm women" to the MFA leadership. Not only did the male leadership accept the proposal, but the president, D.M Gause, made a motion that "the woman's organization be accepted in the association on a 50-50 basis." The audience of 6,000 members, both male and female, applauded this motion and it was carried unanimously "with no dissenting voices in the assembly."<sup>133</sup>

Women in the WPFA continued to reflect this idea that their activities were in "partnership with those of men." An article the 1923 bulletin described farming as a unique occupation because "IN NO OTHER WALK OF LIFE IS WOMAN SO VITALLY INTERESTED IN HER HUSBAND'S BUSINESS OR SO NECESSARY IN ITS OPERATION" (capitals in original). It described poultry and dairy products as "midrib of

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<sup>132</sup> "Statement of Receipts and Disbursements for period August 10, 1927 – July 16, 1928," Klara Munkers, Secretary, WPFA (Rosedale, MO: MFA Auditing Department, 1928), WPFA Records; *WPFA History 1921-1977*, 12-15.

<sup>133</sup> *WPFA History 1921-1977*, 1-7, WPFA Records; "History of the WPFA," in *W.P.F.A. Bulletin* 1 (June 1923), 5-8, in WPFA Records.

many farm incomes,” and declared that women “are quick to catch the vision of a better day to come.” Whereas “men think in terms of today, women dream of tomorrow.”<sup>134</sup>

And, like the women in Iowa and Nebraska, members of the WPFA garnered the support of men in building and maintaining their organization. In 1923, Daniel C. Rogers of the Missouri State Marketing Bureau, praised women’s abilities to raise quality poultry products, and to have a keen eye for marketing procedures. In his commentary about a recent poultry and egg show in Kansas City, Rogers wrote that women “display decidedly more scientific knowledge about quality egg production and marketing than do the men. They also show more pride in marketing clean, fresh eggs. In fact, this is so outstanding after one spends a week or two with the State Marketing Bureau boys at the better eggs meetings, that there are indications that ‘there is a man behind it’ whenever dirty, smeared eggs are brought to market.”<sup>135</sup>

In another 1924 statement to the WPFA, William Hirth, a founding member of the MFA, urged women to “take the lead in the fight for ‘quality eggs’ in every community.” Women needed to inform themselves about marketing practices in order to “build a foundation for a kind of farm life that will be sufficiently profitable so that the women of the farm and their babies will be able to have as many of the comforts and blessings of life as do their sisters who live in the towns and cities.”<sup>136</sup>

These sentiments persisted, and even in 1939, William Hirth expressed great respect for the WPFA when he gave an address at their annual meeting. He believed that male farm

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<sup>134</sup> “History of the WPFA,” and “A Sketch of the Bona Fide Farm Men and Women,” in *W.P.F.A. Bulletin* 1 (June 1923), 5-8, in WPFA Records. Caps in original.

<sup>135</sup> Daniel C. Rogers, “Missouri Women and Quality Eggs,” in *W.P.F.A. Bulletin* 2 (June 1924), 29-31, WPFA Records.

<sup>136</sup> William Hirth, “What the Women can do for the Producers’ Contract,” in *W.P.F.A. Bulletin* 2 (June 1924), 27, WPFA Records.

leaders had been “short sighted” in their failure to give greater recognition to women’s groups, especially when women could use their votes to change agricultural policies at the state and federal levels. Hirth also criticized male elevator operators, implement dealers, and other agribusiness men for refusing to “lend a hand in establishing WPFA clubs in their communities.” He believed the WPFA was the “most progressive women’s farm organization in the United States,” because it studied and worked to change policy while other women’s organizations only listened to ““canned ideas about soil conservation, and how to cook wonderful new dishes, and to make over old hats and dresses... and to be duly impressed with our ‘wonderful’ Department of Agriculture.” Hirth ultimately concluded that the farm wife not only shared in the burdens of her husband, but also had to worry about “looking after the children, and seeing to it that every dime goes as far as possible in supplying the modest wants which have so much to do with their outlook upon life.” Therefore “why shouldn’t the average farm wife have a keener appreciation of the importance of economic justice than her husband?”<sup>137</sup>

Finally, the WPFA also enjoyed a close relationship with the Cooperative Extension Service, though the two were not as directly connected as the IFBFWC and the Iowa State Cooperative Extension. In Missouri, the Extension Service operated its own homemakers clubs and began sponsoring women’s activities in 1912, when the first groups of women worked to establish hot lunch programs in rural schools. One of the primary problems in developing homemakers clubs, however, was the fact that many counties could not afford to hire full-time home demonstration agents. In 1920, for example, only sixteen counties had

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<sup>137</sup> William Hirth, “A Great Organization,” *Annual Program, WPFA* (10 June 1939), 17-20, WPFA Records.

home demonstration agents, and this number actually declined to eight in 1927 before creeping back up. Because of this, Extension homemaker's clubs did not develop on a wide scale until the mid-1930s, with the founding of the Missouri Extension Homemakers Association in 1936. Instead of depending on home demonstration agents, then, many women formed clubs and designed their own lessons on clothing, nutrition, home furnishings, and other subjects based on packets of information mailed out from the county and state Extension offices. This "local leader" program became the mainstay of Extension policy in Missouri, though many women still demanded that their county hire a home demonstration agent to ensure greater organization of programs and clubs. In 1919, in Barry County, Missouri for example, twelve farm women formed the first club in the county without a home demonstration agent. With the help of Extension publications they pursued such projects as making dress forms and hats, but it was more than ten years, during which time the women persistently petitioned the state, before Barry County received its first home demonstration agent.<sup>138</sup>

During the early 1920s, the WPFA addressed this problem by encouraging members to raise the money to hire a home demonstration agent. In addition to the \$2,000 to \$2,500 required for the agent's salary, a county also had to finance an agent's traveling expenses, office rent, office supplies, telephone and telegraph, and other administrative needs. The total cost of hiring a home demonstration agent then, averaged \$4,000 per year, and counties were required to provide this amount for at least three years. Furthermore, even though the

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<sup>138</sup> Scarborough, 366-367; Interview with Fern Still, Barry County, Missouri, (n.d.) Missouri Extension Homemakers Association, Oral History Project, WUNP 4650, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, Missouri; "Number of County Home Demonstration Agents," in "Home Economics History, 1912-1967," in Missouri Extension Homemaker's Association Records, WUNP 4319, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, MO.

Extension Service would accept private funds, administrators preferred that these funds be “definite and permanent.” County courts could appropriate public funds to partially support Extension work, but appropriations could only be made to women’s organizations with at least 250 members, making it difficult for new, local organizations to qualify. In response, in 1924, the WPFA advised its members to have local leaders meet with Extension personnel and determine the feasibility of garnering the support, as well as financial pledges, from the residents of the county. Though their organizational records did not indicate whether the members of the WPFA were successful in their campaign, it is still important to note that the women looked to Extension personnel for their expertise, and they considered the Extension Service as a means to better organize women’s organizations and create interest among farm women.<sup>139</sup>

Across the nation, women who belonged to farm organizations generally worked to broaden the organization’s appeal by encouraging non-partisan efforts to strengthen the rural community, and the leaders of rural women’s organizations played an integral role in developing this philosophy. They conformed to this ideal and emphasized the shared experiences of all farm women: the work, the uncertainty, and the unique qualities of rural life. During the first half of the twentieth century, rural women’s organizations encouraged traditional gender roles and promoted conservative politics, but members did not necessarily relegate themselves to subordinate positions. The leaders of rural women’s clubs across the

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<sup>139</sup> A.J. Meyer, “How to Secure a County Home Economics Agent,” in *W.P.F.A. Bulletin* 2 (June 1924), 50-51, WPFA Records.

In 1937, the members of the Missouri Extension Homemakers Association (MEHA) voted to invite the WPFA to join them in promoting Extension work. From the subsequent records of the MEHA, however, it did not appear that the WPFA accepted the invitation. See “Minutes of the Missouri Homemakers’ Conference, 1928-1949,” 51, in Missouri Extension Homemaker’s Association Records, WUNP 4319, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, MO.

Midwest expected members to learn about issues, to react to political and social conditions, and to act as the public relations arm of the male-dominated organizations. Furthermore, female leaders expected members to evolve as changes in technology, farm policy, and world events reshaped their lives. This conclusion rests on the premise that the term “activism” must extended beyond radicalism, protests, and withholding actions, to encompass activities defined as home demonstration programs or educational efforts. More importantly, when the term “activism” is applied to rural women’s efforts, it must not be immediately connected to issues concerning gender equity. Instead, scholars must consider the agricultural context in which farm women worked. Women accepted dominion over domestic and social issues because the complementary nature of rural organizations, as the Farm Bureau and the MFA, mirrored the division of labor on many farms, where men and women focused on separate tasks for the sake of the whole. Women’s efforts to secure a better standard of living could not easily be separated from issues concerning commodity prices, production, and technology, because those factors directly related to the women’s abilities to improve homes and communities.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 239.

### Chapter 3

#### “We Learned to do the Things That Rural Women Did”: County and Township Women’s Clubs in the Midwest, 1950-1985

On 2 March 1950, in Boone County, Missouri, fourteen members of the Barnette Welfare Workers Club called their monthly meeting to order in the old Harrisburg Schoolhouse, just as they had done for the past five years. A typical meeting, like that of February 1950, usually began with a reading, in unison, of “The Homemakers Creed,” and continued with singing, approving the minutes of past meetings, presenting book reviews, and listening to a member talk on a topic such as “Poise and Posture,” which stressed the importance of sitting, standing, and walking properly. This meeting on 2 March 1950, however, was different. Rural school consolidation in this mid-Missouri county left the old Harrisburg School vacant, and after months of negotiation with the school board and several community fundraisers, the Barnette Welfare Workers Club, a township club associated with the Missouri Extension Homemakers Association, was about to purchase the building for \$150.<sup>141</sup>

Members of the Barnette Welfare Workers Club began meeting at the school house in 1945, but efforts to actually buy the property and raise the money began in October 1949, with a rummage sale and a Pie Supper Auction that generated \$115.24. In November and December, another rummage sale and auction raised \$43.45 – for a total of \$173.09. This was enough to not only purchase the old school, but also pay the \$7.50 insurance premium and make improvements to the property. It would be several months, though, before the

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<sup>141</sup> “Treasurer’s Book,” 1949, and Meeting Minutes, 2 February 1950, 2 March 1950, Barnette Welfare Workers Extension Club, Boone County, MO, Records, C 3776, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, MO (hereafter cited as Barnette Welfare Workers Extension Club Records, WHMC).



school board was willing to sell. So throughout the winter, as they continued negotiations with the school board, the women of the Barnette Welfare Workers Club painted the walls with a high-quality Kemtone paint, purchased a hot plate, and asked their husbands to assist in landscaping the front walk. Then, on 2 March, on the eve of this major purchase, the women set out to gather information about the school house and land surrounding it. Though the neighborhood had lost its school to consolidation, these women sought to retain their sense of community by preserving this public space. The club officers planned a presentation for the Harrisburg School Board, and a newly formed committee began formulating a constitution, bylaws, and rules to give the women's club an official standing in the community.

Because they hoped to turn the old school into a respectable community center, the women established rules for using the building, required chaperones for any "young peoples meeting," and banned dances, card parties, gambling, alcohol, or "anything demoralizing to our community." They also prohibited any fundraisers except those for their own club. Club members, however, welcomed community events and they had high hopes that their new clubhouse would become a central meeting place for a variety of organizations in Barnette Township. And on 25 March, members of the Barnette Welfare Workers Club became the official owners and managers of their own club house.<sup>142</sup>

As a handful of women engaged in organization building at the state level and established women's activities as essential components of major agricultural groups, thousands more, like those in the Barnett Welfare Workers Club, participated as members of

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<sup>142</sup> "Treasurer's Book," 1949 and 1950, and Meeting Minutes, 5 January 1950, 2 February 1950, 2 March 1950, Barnette Welfare Workers Extension Club Records, WHMC.

local women's clubs at the township and county levels. The previous chapter illustrated how women transformed organizations at the state level by demanding greater responsibilities, and also by encouraging women to take interest in agricultural issues. Yet the question remains whether state leaders expressed an unattainable ideal for farm women, or if these clubs did in fact prepare ordinary women to participate in the political process and become community leaders. The answer lies in the records of the local clubs affiliated with the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation Women's Committee (IFBFWC) and the Missouri Extension Homemakers Association (MEHA), the largest organizations for women in each state.

A comparative study of women's clubs affiliated with the IFBFWC and the MEHA will show that, while the two organizations were different in many ways, each organization struggled with the problems related to agricultural adjustment in the decades following the Second World War, and each responded in a similar manner by introducing new programs they believed more relevant to the modern farm wife. Furthermore, the local clubs affiliated with each organization depended on materials distributed by state leaders, which were often created by expert home economists working for the state Extension Service. The meeting minutes and scrapbooks these local clubs created reveal that while farm women's clubs did use these materials and sought out some educational and political opportunities, most members relished monthly meetings as time to socialize, relax, and share work. Few aspired to state leadership positions or to become political leaders, but most had a vested interest in building and maintaining a strong local club. Membership and leadership roles were often

fluid and flexible, reflecting traditional work patterns on the farm by valuing collective labor and shared work.<sup>143</sup>

That these clubs took on a social nature should not imply that the members did not strive to attain the ideals state leaders set out, only that members of these groups often adapted state programs and selected only those aspects they found most useful. If the ultimate purpose of agricultural organizations was to advance conditions in the countryside, then women turned to these local clubs as a means to create and preserve friendships, uphold community traditions, and to promote community improvement projects. In 1954, Nell

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<sup>143</sup> Both the IFBFWC and the MEHA enjoyed the support of the State Cooperative Extension Service, and both strongly encouraged women to participate in political and community service activities, but the greatest difference between the two is their relationship to Extension. During the 1950s, the Iowa Farm Bureau was ordered to sever its legal and financial ties with the State Cooperative Extension Service, while the MEHA continued to rely directly on Extension personnel. It may be supposed that the IFBFWC would have become even more politicized by the late 1950s, following the separation of the IFBF and the Iowa State Cooperative Extension Service, but this does not appear to be the case, especially at the local levels. In Iowa, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the IFBFWC continued to follow a generally conservative agenda similar to that of the 1940s and 1950s.

The previous chapter illustrated the importance of the Extension Service and Home Demonstration agents in providing services and information, as well as financial support and organizations structure for women's activities. In November 1954, however, the Secretary of Agriculture, Ezra Taft Benson, ordered all private organizations to withdraw financial support from the Extension Service in order to make it an independent government body without any particular organizational affiliation. As the American Farm Bureau Federation grew in strength and became an established presence in Washington, D.C., many politicians, farmers, and agriculturalists came to believe that the Extension Service could not offer a non-partisan commitment to community service if it continued its financial relationship with an increasingly political group. After 1954, though Farm Bureau women across the Midwest remained active in Extension programs, they could no longer rely on the county home economists to provide leadership training and organizational support. See: "Marshall County," *ANR* (State of Iowa, 1955) 16; *Iowa Farm Bureau Federation Women's Committee Handbook* (1955-1956) IFBFWC Records; Memorandum no. 1368, "Activities of Department Employees with Relation to General and Specialized Organization of Farmers," Department of Agriculture, Office of the Secretary, Washington (24 November, 1954), IFBF Records.

Benson's memorandum forbade Extension officials from soliciting memberships for organizations, advocating one farmers' organization as being better suited for farmers' needs over another, or accepting "the use of free office space or contributions for salary traveling expense from any general or specialized organization of farmers." This memorandum did not come as a surprise to Farm Bureau leaders because the USDA had threatened such a measure for many years. In 1950, Utah Congressman, Walter K. Granger, introduced a bill to prohibit the use of federal funds for extension programs in any state where the Extension Service accepted any funds from a private organization. IFBF President E. Howard Hill testified before the House Agriculture Committee in Washington, D.C. on the Granger Bill, and argued that the bill's provisions violated states' rights to decide on agricultural programs. He addressed the fact that the IFBF would be "much better off financially" if they did not contribute to the Extension Service, but that the IFBF believed the relationship to be worth such expenditures. C.M. Wilson, IFBF Press Release (29 May 1950), IFBF Records.

Forsyth, an Iowa farm woman and member of the Cedar Valley Community Club, wrote of her local club's proud association with the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation (IFBF). She believed that social and service activities of the Cedar Valley Community Club, founded in June 1920, filled a void in the lives of its members. In her brief history of the club, Forsyth wrote, "However small may have been our early beginnings, we *have* filled a needed place in our community. By the mere coming together once a month to meet and greet and eat, we have cultivated fellowship, friendliness, loyalty, and love toward each other" (emphasis in original).<sup>144</sup>

Both the social and political aspects of the IFBFWC and the MEHA became especially important for many farm families after 1950, as more families moved away from the farm and informal neighborhood networks became less stable. During this period, the average farm size in Iowa increased from 160 acres in 1950 to nearly 250 acres in 1970, while the number of farms declined from 107,183 to 72,257 in the same period. In 1949, farmers made up 16.3 percent of the American population, but by 1964, the number had fallen to 6.8 percent. In Iowa, as with many Midwestern states, these numbers remained slightly higher than the national average, but still experienced a sharp decline. In 1950, 29.9 percent of Iowans lived on farms. By 1960, this number dropped to 24 percent, in 1970 it fell again to 18.1 percent, and by 1980, just 13.4 percent of Iowans lived on farms. Within a decade, in 1990, only 9.2 percent of Iowa residents called the farm home. Though rural depopulation was a nationwide trend, these changes were especially unsettling in states known for their agricultural productivity. Yet farm families adapted and coped with these

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<sup>144</sup> Nell M. Forsyth, "Cedar Valley Club History," (23 June 1954), Cedar Valley Community Club, Records, Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

changes. By the mid-1960s, farm women lived in a vastly different world than their predecessors of the 1920s. For example, by 1966, 98.7 percent of Iowa farms had electricity, which allowed farm families to invest in household equipment such as refrigerators, washing machines, vacuums, televisions, and freezers. Such modern conveniences and consumption of consumer goods not only required the women to learn new homemaking techniques, but also to earn a greater cash income. In 1960, nearly twenty percent of farm women over fourteen years of age held jobs off the farm, compared to just thirteen percent in 1950.<sup>145</sup>

Farm women also began to share characteristics with urban women partly because they were one in the same; in the postwar period young men increasingly brought their “war brides and college sweethearts” back to the farm so that by 1955, one study found two of

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<sup>145</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, *Agricultural Statistics: 1967* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1967) 443, 573; Willis Goudy, Sandra Charvat Burke, Seung-pyo Hong, Liu Dong Wang, Liu Qiang, and John Wallize, *Rural/Urban Transitions in Iowa*, Census Services, Department of Sociology, Iowa State University (1996), 59, 82; Margaret Hanson, Willis Goudy, Renea Miller, Sharon Whetstone, *Agriculture in Iowa: Trends from 1935 to 1997*, Census Services, Department of Sociology, Iowa State University (1999), 29.

With increasing electrification of rural homes in Iowa, families did enjoy modern conveniences on a large scale. In 1960, 87.4 percent of Iowa farm homes had piped water, 96.3 percent had a washing machine, 64.3 had a freezer, 91.3 had a telephone, and 90.6 had a television. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1960 Census of Housing* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1963).

Economic conditions, though still unstable, were also better than they had been in a generation. After twenty years of agricultural depression, prosperity returned to farm families in the early 1940s. Between 1940 and 1946, commodity prices increased 138 percent, while the average farm income increased by 236 percent. This enabled farmers to invest in more land and equipment and to compensate for wartime labor shortages. In the years immediately following the Second World War, continued price supports and food relief programs in Europe and Asia allayed farmers’ fears of a return to the Great Depression. Though farmers experienced uncertain years, and even periods of crisis after the Congress voted down the Brannan Plan in 1950 and scaled down price supports in 1951, they would not encounter hardships akin to those in the 1930s. For the shrinking percentage of rural residents who remained on farms, their standard of living changed dramatically; this was especially true for women whose work patterns began to reflect a greater dependence on a cash income and consumer products. In 1955, Marshall County Home Economist, Greta W. Bowers, wrote that with modernization rural homes became “more attractive” and farm families experienced a greater sense of “closeness.” In addition, she noted that labor saving devices provided women with more time to take on additional responsibilities, including civic affairs, off-farm work, and farm and family management. See: Patrick H. Mooney and Theo J. Majka, *Farmers’ and Farm Worker’ Movements: Social Protest in American Agriculture* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995) 90-91; “Marshall County,” *Annual Narrative Reports of County Extension Agents*, (State of Iowa, 1955), 17 (Hereafter cited as *ANR*); The term “farm and family management” refers to keeping accurate accounts, establishing retirement plans, making out wills, managing property deeds, and other business aspects of farming.

every three farm wives to be from towns and cities. Moreover, younger farm women tended to be better educated. In 1957, a national survey of 11,500 Extension clubwomen found that 86 percent of members under the age of thirty had completed high school, 20 completed between one and three years of college, and 8 percent graduated from college. On the other hand, of women between the ages of 40 and 49, 60 percent had completed high school, 17 percent completed between one and three years of college, and 5 percent graduated from college. For women over 60 years of age, the numbers were even lower. In that category, just 32 percent had completed high school, 13 percent completed between one and three years of college, and 3 percent graduated from college. Even more striking is the comparison between those who completed only eight grades or less. Of those women under thirty, only 4 percent ended their education before the eighth grade. For those over 60, however, the number stood at 43 percent.<sup>146</sup>

Younger women then, were more likely to have different expectations and needs in Extension programming. Many already had home economics training in high school and college, and they sought out more focused activities to build on existing skills. And as women experienced all of these changes in agriculture and rural life, many farm women turned to local clubs as a means to maintain personal relationships, retain some semblance of a neighborhood, and uphold rural traditions, while adapting to new conditions on the farm. Overall, throughout this period, the number of women who belonged to homemakers clubs and Extension clubs declined. Yet evidence from membership rolls reveals that this was more

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<sup>146</sup> Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 174; Jewell G. Fessenden, "These Are the Women Who Are Members of Home Demonstration Organizations in the United States: A Report from a National Study of Home Demonstration Members," Extension Circular 528 (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, 1958), 2-3.

a product of rural depopulation and the aging of rural residents than a loss of interest on the part of farm wives. Even into the 1980s, many farm women still joined women's clubs as a means to socialize, learn new skills, and create some semblance of community.

These changes affected how the IFBFWC and the MEHA shaped their programs in the post-war era. Once they believed farm families had attained a desirable standard of living, organizational leaders and Extension personnel moved away from sponsoring concrete educational efforts to encouraging more abstract and intellectual pursuits. In 1965, when Missouri Extension leader Kathryn Zimmerman wrote a history of the MEHA, she believed that the Second World War marked an important transition for Extension clubs, when women "became more interested in local, national, and world affairs." Zimmerman added that, "It was during this period that Missouri Extension clubwomen saw the contribution they could make to their communities by introducing educational information in their clubs." And by 1954 such programs appeared to be standard components of club meetings. That year clubwomen affiliated with the MEHA could choose to study a broad range of topics, including American traditions, brucellosis, the changing role of Europe's farm women, farm and home safety, hospitals, Missouri laws regarding handicapped children, preparing for later years, and the needs of the nation's teenagers. Similarly, in 1958, an article in the *Iowa Farm Bureau Spokesman* declared that Farm Bureau women had, "graduated from 'chief cook and bottle washer' status into full fledged study and action groups which tackle problems ranging from world trade to school finance."<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Kathryn Zimmerman, "Background on the Purpose, Goals, History, and Methodology of the Home Economics Extension," (August 1965), 7, and Kathryn Zimmerman, "Report on Extension Clubs," in "Home Economics History, 1912-1967," in Missouri Extension Homemakers Association Council and Club, Records, WUNP 4319, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, MO; "No Problem too Big for Women in

Certainly, this shift was not unique to rural women's clubs. During the 1950s, women's organizations across the country placed greater emphasis on educational components, civic improvement, and political activities than they had in the previous decade. Historian Susan Lynn has pointed out that although they did not label it "social housekeeping," a term for women's activism in Progressive era, women of the 1950s and 1960s still used domesticity to justify their quest for "social justice and a new world order based on peace and international cooperation." Certainly, during this period, both the IFBFWC and MEHA agendas became increasingly more complicated and sophisticated. Though the family remained central to their purpose, state leaders in both organizations urged women to become active in international relations, politics, agricultural policy, safety, rural health, law and order, and preservation of democracy.<sup>148</sup>

In a 1966 article aimed at farm women, Mrs. Otto Garrela, the Pocahontas County Farm Bureau Women's Chairman, wrote: "The moral and religious tone of the nation is set in our homes. This is an old challenge, yet one ever new with each generation. This, then, is our first and probably our most important role, to set the moral and religious values of our

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the IFBF," *Iowa Farm Bureau Spokesman*, 24, no 19 (4 January 1958) 2A. (Articles from the *Iowa Farm Bureau Spokesman* hereafter cited as *Spokesman*).

<sup>148</sup> The shift toward intellectual pursuits also occurred in the Women's Progressive Farm Association, which was mentioned in the last chapter. In 1950, when the WPFA had a membership of 6,149, the monthly programs assigned by state leaders included, "The country doctor," "Russia," "Women of Renown," "American Democracy," "Weather," "Clothing," "Safety for All," and "Travel by Proxy." Interestingly, when the 1950 WPFA Yearbook listed even reasons why women should be members of the organization, leaders openly criticized Extension homemakers clubs as groups led by "city-bred organizers." Unlike Extension, which reached out to both urban and rural women, the WPFA claimed to be "the only statewide organization of women who toil on the farm." It was "by and for farm women, with all other influences shut out." Extension clubs, on the other hand, with their urban influences, were "like sparking dew drops in the dawn of the morning, they do not endure throughout the day." Finally, the WPFA was considerably more aggressive than either the IFBFWC or the MEHA in asserting women's importance in agriculture. Again, in 1950, the WPFA yearbook claimed that the organization provided "farm women their first opportunity to express themselves on questions that vitally concern home and community life, which has been denied them in the past." See: *Bulletin and Yearbook, 1950*, and "Report of Audit of WPFA, July 21, 1950 to July 21, 1951," in Women's Progressive Farm Association of Missouri, Inc., Records, C3726, Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, Columbia, Missouri.



nation.” That said, Garrela reasoned that, because of their roles as the moral custodians of society, women needed to be involved with family spending decisions, farm management, business, marketing, the IFBF, and politics. Farm Bureau women embraced modernity while holding on to old ideals; the Progressive era merged with the Space Age in the comments of Mrs. Cecil L. Sickels, Ringgold County Women’s Chair. In 1961, she wrote that women should use the family, where “the ideals which nurture our way of life are conceived,” as the “launching pad” for all programs.<sup>149</sup>

Farm Bureau and Extension Club women of this period further expressed desires to live as “modern women,” as they embraced the urban ideals of consumerism, femininity, and leisure. In many ways, club membership no longer helped women learn to “make do” with less, but rather membership was an indicator of leisure time and of one’s place in the new affluent society. Missouri Extension leader Kathryn Zimmerman recognized the fact that following the Second World War, rural women had new opportunities to “travel more freely, to get together in groups, and to bring themselves up to date on the new products now becoming available in the marketplace.” Membership in MEHA clubs, then, signaled a woman’s ability to participate in the consumer economy. An increased emphasis on parliamentary procedure and detailed record keeping is also indicative of the fact that, for

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<sup>149</sup> Susan Lynn, “Gender and Progressive Politics: A Bridge to Social Activism of the 1960s,” in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994) 104; Mrs. Otto Garrels, “Role of farmer’s wife becomes more important,” *Spokesman* 34, no. 1 (9 September 1966) 12; Mrs. Cecil L. Sickels, “Women’s Work,” *Spokesman* 27, no. 47 (29 July 1961) 13.

rural women, whose lives were characterized by hard work, financial instability, and long days, club meetings allowed women to indulge in genteel, formal activities.<sup>150</sup>

As their desire for leisure activities and modern conveniences grew, so too did their concerns for personal appearance. Rather than programs dedicated to sewing, women began to demand information on making their own “figure flattering” garments. Nutrition programs that emphasized weight management, both through the Extension Service and the Farm Bureau, became popular in the early 1950s and remained a fashionable subject well into the 1960s. In 1959, members of the Freedom Township Women’s Club in Palo Alto County, Iowa, invited a public health nurse to speak on the topic: “Habitual Health is Good Eating.” The women then viewed the film, “Losing to Win,” and agreed that weight control was an important subject for many of the members. Even at the 1970 Summer Conference, the women of the IFBFWC jokingly referred to a reducing salon in the hotel that started a weight-losing contest, with the winner earning the “No-belly Award.” Comments on clothing and style also appeared on the women’s page of the *Spokesman*. Whereas former IFBFWC chairperson Ruth Sayre, who served during the 1930s and 1940s, had been revered for her economical clothing and worn winter coat, in 1961, IFBFWC chairperson Alice Van Wert declared, “The American farm wife today is as hat-conscious and familiar with the latest in hair-dos and clothes as any woman in the city.” This is reflected in a 1966 poem by Mrs. Gordon Stine, who asked the county women’s chairpersons: “So how do you look this

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<sup>150</sup> Kathryn Zimmerman, “Background on the Purpose, Goals, History, and Methodology of the Home Economics Extension,” (August 1965), 8, in Missouri Extension Homemakers Association Council and Club, Records, WUNP 4319, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, MO.

morning?/ Is your hat sitting true?/ Do you have your gloves and purse?/ And are your shoes shining too?”<sup>151</sup>

On the other hand, the IFBFWC and the MEHA carefully balanced desires for leisure and gentility with agricultural activities and with social, political, and personal programs. State leaders in both Iowa and Missouri promoted voting, and beginning in 1950, the IFBFWC launched a non-partisan “Get Out the Vote” campaigns to register voters and increase participation at the polls. They expanded their health programs beyond personal hygiene to encompass mental health, special education for disabled children, alcoholism, doctor-to-patient ratios, and access to hospitals. In the immediate post-war years, and continuing through the following decades, the IFBFWC and the MEHA stepped up educational programs on international trade and the United Nations, with country-by-country studies, and reports from international travelers. One of major programs during this time was farm and home safety, with the Farm Bureau women taking responsibility for compiling an annual farm safety survey for the state. The comprehensive survey recorded specific accidents in the home, with farm machinery, with animals, and on rural roads, and it resulted in a movement to investigate and correct intersections. The women held defensive driving courses and promoted the use of the orange triangle as a symbol for slow moving vehicles.

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<sup>151</sup> Yearbook, 1959, Freedom Township Women’s Club, Records, Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa; “Now That You’ve Lost Weight – Alter Clothes for your New Figure,” *Spokesman* 20, no. 27 (27 February 1954) 20; *Spokesman* 20, no. 49 (31 July 1954) 3; “Lyon County,” *ANR* (State of Iowa, 1955) 10; Julie McDonald, *Ruth Buxton Sayre: First Lady of the Farm* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1980) 59; “Farm Wives Chic-to-Chic...” *Spokesman* 27, no. 29 (18 March 1961) 4; *Iowa Farm Bureau Federation Women’s Committee Handbook* (1966-1967) IFBFWC Records. In 1967, Stine wrote another poem dedicated to the county women’s chairpersons, and this time did not emphasize beauty, but rather skill. She wrote: “You were chosen for your ability/ Your talent and your charms,/ And you will head the finest group,/ The women of the farms.” *Iowa Farm Bureau Federation Women’s Committee Handbook* (1967-1968) IFBFWC Records.

Safety also included educational activities on farm chemicals, such as fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides, as well as water testing for contaminants.

All of these projects fell into the women's domain, and although they retained a gendered identity, Farm Bureau and Extension Club women did not appear to question female authority either at home or within their organization. In 1953, Christine Inman reported on a meeting of the Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW) in Toronto, Canada, where there had been heated debate over a resolution to promote economic equality for women. Inman herself favored the measure and had "always been of the opinion that women were entitled to positions and pay equal to men." After some thought, she realized that, "maybe there is sex discrimination here in our country, maybe right here in Iowa," but she made no suggestions to correct the situation.<sup>152</sup>

Furthermore, as shown in the previous chapter, the men of the IFBF welcomed women's participation and often relied on women to support membership drives and handle publicity. Between 1950 and 1970, male leaders still expected women to play these roles and continued to call on women to be active members of the organization. At the 1954 Summer Conference, IFBF President E. Howard Hill called the Nineteenth Amendment "one of the seven great documents of the world," and compared it to the Declaration of Independence, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Magna Carta. He concluded, "The Women Suffrage Act may be the one which will result in our being able to maintain the freedoms established through the first six great documents." Hill retained this attitude in another speech at the 1959 Summer Conference. There, he praised the women for their part in building the Farm

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<sup>152</sup> Christine Inman, "Women's Rights Motion Beaten, So Discrimination Question Lingers," *Spokesman* 20, no. 8 (17 October 1953) 5.

Bureau organization, and urged them to speak out on the issue of reapportionment, which was the leading political issue in 1960s Iowa.<sup>153</sup>

Ten years later, at the 1969 Summer Conference, IFBF President J. Merrill Anderson again welcomed the women with a speech in which he asked the IFBFWC to communicate with consumers and help promote a more favorable image of agriculture. Glen Taylor, the public policy director for the IFBF in the late 1960s, often relied on the women to take an active role in publicity projects. In 1968, he wrote, “Farm Bureau women can and should play a very important part in Farm Bureau’s political education and citizenship program,” and in 1970, he urged women to serve on school boards, in the legislature, and in all political affairs. He also told the women they should encourage their husbands to be more active in the community. Also at the 1970 Summer Conference, Jerry Moser, the IFBF special activities director, recognized the dual roles women’s chairpersons played at the county and state levels; on one hand they were in charge of administering the women’s program, but on the other they were voting members of the executive boards. He told the women that they must “keep their program close to the central thrusts of the organization,” and emphasize general Farm Bureau programs at women’s meetings.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> “Summer Echo,” Iowa Farm Bureau Federation Women’s Committee Summer Conference (1954) IFBFWC Records; “Hill Urges Women to Help Explain Reapportionment Principle,” *Spokesman* 25, no. 44 (4 July 1959) 1;

<sup>154</sup> “IFBF President Urges Farm Bureau Women to Help Create a Favorable Image for Agriculture,” *Spokesman* 35, no. 44 (5 July 1969) 11; Glen Taylor, “Farm Bureau Women have a Role in Political Education, Citizenship,” *Spokesman*, 35, no. 26 (24 February 1968) 14; “Continue Community Work FB Women are Told,” and “Bring Programs Closer Together,” *Spokesman* 36, no. 43 (27 June 1970). The issue of reapportionment, or changing legislative representation to reflect shifting proportions of urban and rural residents, consumed Iowa politics throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Amendments passed in 1904 and 1928 provided for a 108-member House and a 50-member Senate. Neither of the amendments made provisions for representation based on population; the House consisted of one representative from each county, and two representatives from the nine most populous counties, while no county was allowed more than one Senator. Beginning in 1950, the IFBF fought efforts to change the legislature to reflect growing urban populations because they believed doing so would compromise rural interests. Likewise, urban advocates favored reapportionment because they felt the majority of Iowans, who lived in urban areas, were not fairly represented.

What changed in this period was the fact that male leaders no longer emphasized women's special qualities or skills, especially those that made women more apt to tackle practical aspects of caring for homes and families. Instead, they began to emphasize women's roles as consumers and believed that women were most helpful in promoting understanding between urban consumers and rural producers. In 1964, former editor turned columnist, Dan Murphy, advised farmers to consider how they might market their products toward a certain "gal," the American housewife. He wrote, "Her tastes, habits, customs change. To do business with her, we must find out what she wants, where and why she buys." That "gal," he reminded farmers, "can make or break us, all by herself." Yet this shift in perception did not appear to exclude women from the IFBF any more than in the past, but only served to uphold existing gender distinctions.<sup>155</sup>

Male leaders considered the IFBFWC a permanent entity, and while they did not challenge its place in the organization, they not give it any particular regard. They suggested that women help spread Farm Bureau principles, and even work more closely with the main IFBF programs, but they did not encourage women to actively seek leadership positions outside of the IFBFWC. With the exception of the legislative, resolutions, and budget committees, as well as other temporary committees where women held voting seats, women did not generally become involved with the main organization at the state level. Some women served on boards at the county and township levels, but they remained in the minority, and generally, they did not take on any additional responsibilities for the

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After several plans failed to satisfy major fractions within the state, the Supreme Court resolved the issue in 1972 by imposing a court-ordered plan. The 1972 plan reorganized both the House and Senate on the basis of population, and it set legislative districts according to population deviations of less than one-tenth of 1 percent, making Iowa's legislature the "most equitably districted legislature in the nation." Dorothy Schwieder, *Iowa: the Middle Land* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1996), 298-301.

<sup>155</sup> Dan Murphy, "An Important Goal," *Spokesman* 30, no. 31 (4 April 1964) 1.

administration or management of the IBBF beyond the women's committee. State leaders of the IBBFWC made no demands to this effect, and members continued to enthusiastically accept authority over social and family issues.

All of these changes, from emphasizing personal appearance and leisure, to the new focus on political and social activities, are indicative of the idea that rural clubwomen had become very much like their urban counterparts. Whereas both the IBBFWC and the MEHA were affiliated with the international organization, Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW), women's clubs in small towns and urban settings often belonged to the international organization, the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC). Founded in 1890 by Jane Cunningham Croly, a New York City journalist, the GFWC brought together women's clubs across the country to promote women's education, civic improvement, and a wide array of Progressive era reforms. Non-partisan and non-denominational, national leaders of the GFWC urged members of affiliated clubs to lobby for such reforms as child labor laws and health and safety in the work place. Yet many of the clubs affiliated with the GFWC were located in small towns across the country, and members typically worked within their community as volunteers working on local improvement projects. Because of this, the comparison between farm organizations and the GFWC is particularly helpful because the majority of clubs affiliated with the GFWC were actually located in small Midwestern towns. In 1953, for example, there were 400,000 paying members living in the twelve Midwestern states, representing over half of the entire organization. In Iowa alone there were 851 clubs with 33,704 members.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Proceedings of the 62<sup>nd</sup> National Convention, 25-29 May 1953, (Washington, D.C.) 534, in General Federation of Women's Clubs Conference Records, Women's History Resource Center, General Federation of Women's Clubs, Washington, D.C. (Hereafter cited as WHRC, GFWC).

Though federated clubs represented a wide variety of interests, all members of clubs affiliated with the GFWC declared their commitments to service and fellowship. As with the IFBFWC and the MEHA, the GFWC experienced a period of adjustment following the Second World War. In a 1951 speech to the membership, the president, Dorothy Houghton, reminded women that they lived in a period of rapid change. She said, “These middle years of the Twentieth Century mark a turning point in human history which may easily be the turning point for all centuries.” Houghton then went on to remind members that as women, “our work begins in the home and there in not one of us who is not doing her part to strengthen family life; keep its foundations secure; and extend its influence into the community.” Throughout the Houghton administration, GFWC leaders sought to reorganize administrative networks, strengthen lines of communication, and build relationships between leaders at the national, state, and local levels. This allowed national leaders to keep “the General Federation up to date, streamlined, and active.”<sup>157</sup>

In 1950, the Executive Committee added new departments, including, “Communications and Public Affairs,” as well as a “Committee on Defense and Economic Security,” and a “Committee on Gerontology.” This was in addition to committees already working on issues related to education, health, conservation and the environment, international relations, and a host of other issues similar to those studied by the women in farm organizations. The GFWC also hired a Public Relations Director in order to reach “the smallest club in an unfrequented spot to the largest club of the metropolitan area.” During these years, national GFWC leaders focused on peace, national defense, and democracy.

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<sup>157</sup> Dorothy D. Houghton, “Today’s Challenge,” (1951), General Federation of Women’s Clubs, President’s Papers, Dorothy D. Houghton, WHRC, GFWC.



Leaders encouraged members not only serve their community as volunteers, but also as elected officials. Like the IFBFWC and the MEHA, the GFWC addressed a broad number of topics in order to appeal to a wide range of women, from all walks of life and from all areas of the country.<sup>158</sup>

The main difference between the GFWC and rural women's groups like the IFBFWC and the MEHA, was their position toward gender and gender equity. Rural women's groups tended to emphasize the mutual strengths of men and women, and often encouraged women to work with men, as they would on a family farm, to strengthen the organization. On the other hand, though GFWC leaders utilized the rhetoric of "public housekeeping," they endorsed the Equal Rights Amendment and equal pay for equal work legislation. They also emphasized the individual rights of women. While national leaders maintained a fairly conservative agenda, often speaking out against communism, radicalism, and violence in films and comic books, they strongly encouraged women to take on more roles in public life. Between 1952 and 1954 for example, the GFWC launched an "Americanism" campaign designed to fight communism and encourage patriotic activities. In one press release, Americanism chairperson, Sara A. Whitehurst stated that one way to prevent communism in the United States was to promote women in public affairs. Whitehurst wrote that more women did not seek elected office because "men do not want women in key places." Men viewed ambitious women as adversaries, and the election of women as a "usurpation of their

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<sup>158</sup> Dorothy D. Houghton, "Report of the President," (20 October 1950), General Federation of Women's Clubs, President's Papers, Dorothy D. Houghton, WHRC, GFWC.

Interestingly, in 1950, Iowa women stood at the helms of both the ACWW and the GFWC. In 1948, Ruth Sayre, a farm woman from Ackworth, Iowa began her term as ACWW president, while Dorothy Deemer Houghton, from the small town of Red Oak, Iowa, served a two-year term as president of the GFWC from 1950 until 1952. Though both women were college educated, none had served in professional, paid positions. Both Sayre and Houghton attained these leadership positions by rising through the ranks of voluntary organizations. See Peter Hoehnle, "Iowa Clubwomen Rise to World Stage: Dorothy Houghton and Ruth Sayre," *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* (Spring 2002) 44.

rights” as men. Furthermore, “women do not support women,” through fundraising, campaigning, or votes. Whitehurst believed that “every educational and welfare board should have at least one woman on it,” and that “women should serve on all public budgetary boards, because women know more about keeping a budget than the majority of men.” As the moral custodians of American society, women needed to be involved with policy formation, and the need was urgent. Whitehurst wrote: “If this is not done, it may be another generation before women will play even a small part in the policy-making of this country.” While leaders of the IFBFWC and the MEHA did encourage women to become involved in public life, such strong messages, particularly those that targeted men as antagonists, were rare in materials for farm women.<sup>159</sup>

Yet the commonalities outweighed the differences, and because small-town women’s clubs enjoyed a strong representation in the GFWC, members often expressed concern for both rural and urban issues. At their national conventions, for example, representatives from clubs across the country discussed not only consumer prices, but the impact of imports and tariffs on the prices of domestic goods. They also devoted considerable energy to rural health, education, and soil conservation, presenting these issues as problems affecting all Americans. In 1960, the GFWC Administration Program described the work of the Conservation Department as relevant to all women. It stated “Most conservation work must be done by the farmers and the ranchers who own and work the land, but all of us have a

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<sup>159</sup> Sara A. Whitehurst, “The Fight for Freedom,” Press Release, not dated, General Federation of Women’s Clubs, Mildred Carlson Program Files, WHRC, GFWC.

stake in their success for we are all dependent on the products of the land. We have a public responsibility to be well informed and to lend our support to conservation programs.”<sup>160</sup>

Like the farm women’s clubs, GFWC leaders also expressed concerns that the general membership follow the prescribed programs and adhere to national and state policies. At the same time, they also wanted each club to retain its independence and unique identity. One of the primary ways GFWC leaders encouraged local women to participate in voluntary activities was to sponsor an annual Community Improvement Project. Local clubs could then submit project reports that state and national leaders judged. Not only did Community Improvement Projects allow women to apply their skills, but outstanding clubs also received recognition and prizes at national conventions in Community Achievement Contests. Many of the clubs recognized at the national level truly made a significant difference in their community.

Typical of these projects was that of women’s clubs in Mound City, Missouri, a small town located in the northwest corner of the state. Between 1960 and 1962, the members of five different clubs, the Twentieth Century Club, Clio, Young Matrons, Omega, and the Tuesday Club, sought new recreational facilities for the community. They canvassed homes to garner support for a bond issue to fund a new swimming pool, a new athletic field, and a nine-hole golf course. While they worked in conjunction with other community organizations, the women took the lead in landscaping the new recreational facilities, raising an estimated \$3,000 to pay for plants and supplies. Similarly, in 1960 and 1961, the Twentieth Century Club of Kennett, Missouri, a small town located in the boot heel region of

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<sup>160</sup> “General Federation of Women’s Clubs, Administration Program, 1960-1962,” (Washington D.C.: General Federation of Women’s Clubs, 1960), 6-7, in Katie Ozbirn Program Files, WHRC, GFWC.

the state, established a foster home for “neglected and abandoned children of this county.” When they found that “there was no possible way of providing such a home through taxation,” members secured pledges from local residents and organizations, and promised these pledges to pay the annual operating budget of \$7,000. In addition to raising money, the women also “worked in the actual readying of the building, painting, furniture, scrubbing woodwork, etc.” When the Delta Home for Children opened in October 1961, it provided temporary accommodations, medical care, and resources for approximately twenty-two children, but in their report, members of the Twentieth Century Club wrote of intangible benefits for themselves and the community. The president, Mrs. T.E. Miles, wrote that women gained confidence as they spoke to community organizations, and as they participated in benefit concerts and talent shows. She wrote, “Our lives are enriched by getting out of ruts we hardly knew we were in (how some of us ‘shook in our boots’ at those speaking assignments). We learned some of reasons there are so many terrible neglected children here and some of the things we can do about it, and we have gained the confidence to do them.”<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> “Twentieth Century Club, Clio, Young Matrons, Omega, Tuesday Club, Mound City, Missouri, Summary Report 1960-1962 Community Improvement Program,” undated, and “Twentieth Century Club, Kennett, Missouri, Summary Report 1960-1962 Community Improvement Program,” 26 January 1962, in Katie Ozbirn Program Files, WHRC, GFWC

For an example of a unique project in which women were able to address local concerns, see the Community Improvement Contest winner in Nebraska for 1956. In 1955, members of the Alliance Women’s Club in the isolated, Great Plains town of Alliance, Nebraska, became deeply concerned for the welfare of Native Americans who had come to work at a nearby Army base during the Second World War. After the war, many remained, often living in tents on the edge of town. Though Alliance maintained an Indian Social Service Shelter, it was poorly maintained and inadequately funded. The women’s club not only launched a publicity campaign to raise \$20,000 for the shelter, a goal they surpassed by \$443.18, but they also spoke with managers of businesses who posted signs reading “No Indian Trade Solicited.” Within a short time, all managers voluntarily took down their signs, and members of the Alliance Women’s Club reported, “As a result of these activities, the town is a friendlier, happier community, including the minority group – the American Indian.” See “Report to the Convention of the GFWC on the Community Achievement Contest, 1955-1956,” given by Ruth B. Gay, 16 May 1956, in Helen B. Chapman Program Records, WHRC, GFWC.

Such community improvement contests ensured that even local clubs could be recognized at the national level, and they were part of a leadership strategy to ensure that women in local clubs understood and applied the ideals of state and national leaders. National GFWC leaders expected women to conform to a set of expectations and ideals in order to create consistency among very diverse groups. Such strategies proved successful not only in urban areas and small towns, but also in the countryside. The IFBFWC and the MEHA mirrored GFWC strategies by creating uniform materials for use in meetings, such as handbooks for officers, and by expecting local women's clubs to submit annual reports that detailed service activities. The IFBFWC also recognized outstanding clubs through awards and special exhibitions.

Leaders of the IFBFWC and the MEHA sought to ensure that that serious discussion of social and political issues took place in local meetings by producing handbooks, designing informational courses, and encouraging women to use roll-calls with political themes such as "Freedoms I would not want to lose." In addition, state leaders required local clubs to appoint chairpersons to study specific issues and then report back to the other members. For example, in September 1956, at the first meeting of the Franklin Township Women's Club in O'Brien County, Iowa, members elected chairpersons to study "Freedom in the United States," "The Promotion of Agricultural Commodities," "Safety on the Farm," "Rural Mail Delivery," "Conservation," "Schools," and "Rural Health." During their one-year term, these women read not only Extension and Farm Bureau materials on their assigned topics, but they also clipped articles from newspapers or magazines to share at meetings. Occasionally, they also

developed community improvement projects based on what they learned. For many of the members, this was their primary source for news and discussion on these issues.<sup>162</sup>

Yet producing and disseminating materials was not enough. State leaders often expressed a deep interest in women at the local levels and whether they had followed these prescribed activities. One way to do this was by asking township clubs to submit annual reports and “score sheets.” In 1929, the MEHA introduced a fairly rigorous “Standard of Excellence” for local clubs, and issued certificates to all clubs providing evidence of compliance. In order to meet these standards, state leaders required club members to learn the words of at least two patriotic songs, to elect officers and run meetings using parliamentary procedure, to submit annual reports, and to set and attain goals for community work. Furthermore, clubs needed to publicize their work in the news media and through participation in achievement days, fair exhibits, and county tours. State leaders also asked the women to report any “accomplishments of which you are proud to the Agricultural Extension Service for use in the monthly newsletter.” In addition to maintaining a strong club, the “Standard of Excellence” asked women to step out into the community. Women needed to “do one definite thing which will improve health standards,” to work with local schools and 4-H clubs, and to “provide recreation for the young people of the community.” Finally, in one very specific standard, the MEHA asked club women to survey their local area for any “crippled children under fifteen years of age” in need of medical attention. Should they find such a child, clubwomen were obligated to work as mediators between the parents and the

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<sup>162</sup> “Secretary’s Book, 1956-1957,” in Franklin Township Women’s Club Records, Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa. Hereafter cited as Franklin Township, IWA.

University Hospital in Columbia, Missouri to obtain treatment, even if the parents could not afford such services.<sup>163</sup>

The MEHA's "Standard of Excellence" represented an ideal and set lofty goals for women's clubs, yet it remained a mainstay of MEHA policy for thirty years. Over time, leaders made the standards more flexible and suitable to local conditions. They reduced the number of specific activities and instead asked women to participate in broadly defined activities. Nonetheless, the MEHA kept track of its clubs by issuing standardized minute books and forms to club leaders, filled with tips and suggestions on how to run meetings and complete activities. The 1951 MEHA minute book, for example, included detailed instructions on how to properly format meeting minutes, as well as a sample account from a fictional club. The book also included twelve forms to keep meeting minutes, which asked secretaries to fill the date, number present, the name of the hostess, and the names of visitors. At the back of the book were additional pages for pasting in photographs and news clippings, and the form: "Summary of Work for the Year." This three-page, sixteen-question form asked for the number of members, number of new members, members lost, number of members not living on farms, number of meetings held, average attendance. It also asked members to describe club participation in county and community events such as tours, achievement days, or fairs. It asked for the number of different women acting as project leaders and club officers, the names of members serving as leaders for the first time, the names of 4-H clubs sponsored, the types of projects carried out by 4-H clubs, how the club

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<sup>163</sup> Minutes of the Missouri Homemakers Conference, 23 October 1929, Columbia, Missouri, in Missouri Extension Homemakers Association Council and Club, Records, WUNP 4319, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, MO.

The Missouri Homemakers Conference was changed to the MEHA in 1937.

helped 4-H clubs, how the club directly helped schools and community institutions, the number of women who received help through club meetings or projects, and what the club did to provide recreational activities. Finally, the form asked members to list four “good times your club held or helped with this year,” what the club did to improve health standards or conditions, and the story of the most important accomplishment of the club that year. Clubwomen then submitted these forms to county and state Extension workers, who used the data to better understand their constituents and to design suitable programs.<sup>164</sup>

In addition to publications and forms, state leaders also provided constant encouragement and moral support for local leaders. At the 1952 Iowa Farm Bureau Women’s Committee Summer Conference, when state leaders selected annual programs, Mrs. Glynn Warren gave a speech in which she urged county leaders to raise standards for “Rural Women’s Day,” an annual showcase event for township and county organizations to display their annual projects and accomplishments. She said “Rural Women’s Day is a time to show appreciation for the leaders and workers who have contributed to this program throughout the year – but, we should not spend all day pinning on corsages.” Warren stated that “Rural Women’s Day,” needed to provide “a clear picture of the year’s work in Extension Education

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<sup>164</sup> “Record: Women’s Home Economics Extension Clubs, 1951-1952,” published by the Agricultural Extension Service, University of Missouri College of Agriculture, in Missouri Extension Homemakers Association, Midway Home Boosters, Records, WUNP 5602, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, MO.

The IFBFWC had a similar system for keeping track of local activities, though more often they utilized “Score Sheets,” to be turned in at county leadership workshops. In 1971, for example, local clubs could earn points in twelve different areas: for members of township clubs who attended county meetings, for the number of meetings held, for providing evidence that “a Farm Bureau lesson or emphasis was presented at each township meeting” (usually this was a news clipping), for having their photographs published in the *Iowa Farm Bureau Spokesman*, for donating to the Farm Bureau scholarship fund, for the number of people attending either Rural Women’s Day or Family Night, for having chairmen to cover various issues, and for their township and county activities. Their total scores were pitted against those of other townships, and townships with high scores were recognized at the annual conferences. “Farm Bureau Women’s Township Report and Score Sheet,” for Westburg Township (29 September 1971), in Anita Crawford, Papers, Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.



and Farm Bureau programs,” so that state leaders could evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts. That same year, Mrs. William Garnjobst spoke on leadership and told county leaders, “We must evaluate activities and determine whether or not the program helps our women to become more intelligent, more effective, and more responsible as citizens. Willingness to accept valid criticism, to work together, and to seek progress are important qualifications for a good leader.”<sup>165</sup>

Likewise, at the 1955, IFBFWC Summer Conference, Chairperson Christine Inman hosted a panel discussion entitled, “Looking Both Ways,” in which she encouraged members to build the IFBF from the “township level and up.” Panelists stressed the importance of township activities as a means to unite farm families in speaking out for agriculture. One of the speakers, district chairperson Alice Van Wert, emphasized the idea that national policies often originated as discussions in local clubs. Another speaker, Mrs. John Mavis reinforced this idea when she said, “We women must make particular efforts to help promote resolutions discussions... because the decision made by the entire membership affects every farm and farm home in the state.” Clearly, state leaders expected local women’s clubs to be politically active, and leaders encouraged the women to move beyond purely social activities.<sup>166</sup>

For the women of the IFBFWC, one option for women to gain and apply leadership skills was to become more involved in the general Farm Bureau organization. Because the IFBF maintained groups at the township, county, and state levels, women did not need to

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<sup>165</sup> “The Summer Echo,” published during the IFBFWC Summer Conference, (10 June 1952), Irene Hoover, Papers, Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.

<sup>166</sup> Mrs. I. J. Bulyer, Cherokee County, “Looking Both Ways,” in “The Summer Echo,” published during the IFBFWC Summer Conference, (27 June 1955), Irene Hoover Papers, Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.

travel far in order to participate in administrative tasks alongside men. The Mahaska County Farm Bureau Women's Club, for example, strongly encouraged women to take on leadership roles within the Mahaska County Farm Bureau, and by 1970, women served on nearly every county Farm Bureau Committee, including those not specifically geared toward women. For example, two women served on the Budget Committee, sixteen worked with the Resolutions Committee to formulate policy for the state organization, and eight women worked on the Local Affairs Committee. Another eight women sat on the Young Members Committee, four worked on the Farm Agreement Committee, eight sat on the Legislative Committee, and three served on the Health Care Committee. With so many women serving in the general county organization, one history of the Mahaska County Farm Bureau Women's Club declared "women have continued to fulfill our purpose to assist in developing and implementing Farm Bureau policies and programs. By doing this we urge farm women to accept with pride the responsibility of their citizenship in the community, state, nation, and world."<sup>167</sup>

There is also abundant evidence to suggest that many local members embraced the ideals of state leaders by taking an interest in agricultural and political issues. For example, a common activity in both Iowa and Missouri was for women to take an annual trip to the state capitol in order to visit their state representatives and discuss important issues. In 1955, after having spent considerable time in their local club meetings learning about recent farm-related legislation, and how a bill becomes a law, members of the Mahaska County Farm Bureau Women's Club traveled to Des Moines for a tour of the capitol building and the opportunity

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<sup>167</sup> Josephine Van Zomeran, "Mahaska County Farm Bureau Women: A History" (December 1971), 112-117, in Mahaska County Farm Bureau Women's Clubs, Records, Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.

to discuss “agricultural problems” with Governor Leo Heogh. For several years thereafter, the trip to Des Moines became an annual event, and was typical of county women’s clubs across the state. Such trips to state capitols, as well as major cities to tour industrial and agricultural processing centers, proved extremely popular and memorable.<sup>168</sup>

In most cases, though, these trips offered women the opportunity to shop in department stores and eat in restaurants, a rare event for most Midwestern farm women. On 17 June 1957, after fourteen members of the Franklin Township Women’s Club, in O’Brien County, Iowa, studied mental health and disabilities, they traveled to Sioux City for a tour of a rehabilitation center that served disabled children and adults. In their scrapbook, one member wrote that the tour of the rehabilitation facility was “the highlight of the day.” Mrs. Charlotte Ressegien, the executive director of the facility, led the tour while several of the club women purchased woven mats made by one of residents. Though oddly enough, the member recounting the trip noted while they enjoyed watching the man work as his loom to construct the mats, he was “the only handicapped person we saw.” Following the tour, the women ate lunch at a restaurant, toured the Metz Bakery where they learned about mass-produced bread, and then stopped at the studios of KVTW, where they sat in the studio audience of a local talk show. That particular day, the show featured an interview with Miss Universe. Finally, they “split up to do some shopping and then they met later for dinner at Green Gables,” a local restaurant. This trip, which was typical of women’s clubs, illustrates that the clubs expected these trips to be for both business and leisure.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Josephine Van Zomeren, “Mahaska County Farm Bureau Women: A History” (December 1971), 30-34, in Mahaska County Farm Bureau Women’s Clubs, Records, Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.

<sup>169</sup> Franklin Township Women’s Club, Scrapbook, 1957, Franklin Township Women’s Club Records, IWA.

Commodity promotion was another popular activity that encouraged women to apply their knowledge of agricultural and consumers issues. In 1958 and 1959, members of the Freedom Township Women's Club in Palo Alto County, Iowa, made commodity promotion one of their "main interests." In 1958, they distributed paper napkins from the local Mallard Creamery that "pictured and encouraged the use of meat, milk, butter, and eggs in the home," among themselves and their friends. They also studied pamphlets printed by the Iowa State Dairy Commission, and used these to write an article in the IFBF magazine, the *Spokesman*, to point "out the highly beneficial qualities of animal proteins in the daily consumption of these products and suggesting methods of making the general public more aware of these facts." The following year, the women of Freedom Township borrowed and viewed three films from the Poultry and Egg National Board, and they distributed posters, recipes, and leaflets at the meetings. The women also sponsored a meat cookery demonstration in the nearby town of Emmetsburg. In addition, clubwomen in both Iowa and Missouri sponsored exchanges or contests of baked goods that used butter, lard, and eggs in the recipes. In March 1960, the Highland Do-Better Club, in O'Brien County, Iowa participated with a local pork producers association in a Lard Promotion Day. The women sponsored a "Bake It With Lard" contest, and hoped to raise some money from the sale of winning entries. While the women appear to have been promoting these products primarily to themselves and other rural women, these promotional activities still set an important precedent for women's participation in commodity promotion.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Unattributed news clippings dated September 1958 and 22 September 1959 in Freedom Township Women's Club Scrapbooks, 1958-1959, in Freedom Township Women's Club Records, IWA; Meeting Minutes, 7 March 1960, Highland Do-Better Club Records, IWA.

The records of local clubs also illustrate that local members sometimes took seriously the need to address social, political, and economic issues at their meetings. In 1947, after the Freedom Township Women's Club in Palo Alto County, Iowa completed a unit of study on "International Relations," they decided to adopt an impoverished family in Greece. Using a catalog of families published by a religious organization, the International Relations chairperson, Monica High, selected the family of Olga Christan Akrimon. Orphaned by the war, Akrimon was a young woman responsible for her two younger sisters, a younger brother, and a nephew. The club put together a care package, and High included a letter asking Akrimon to write back with measurements of clothing and a list of other needs. In response, however, the women of Freedom Township were surprised to learn that there were two women named Olga Akrimon living in the same village, and their care package became the source of considerable conflict between the two families. Each Olga Akrimon wrote High to thank her for the box and described the desperate state of their respective families. The local post office in Greece conducted an investigation that lasted more than a month, and found that the first Akrimon family to receive the package was neither poor, nor had they requested assistance. Upon fair receipt of the box, the rightful Olga Akrimon wrote to High to express her gratitude. Members of the Freedom Township Women's Club enjoyed the project, but due to the confusion, did not continue correspondence. They did, however, maintain their interest in International Relations, and in 1954, one of their projects was to send scrapbooks describing the United States to women in foreign countries. At the county Rural Women's Day, one county leader commented, "May these books be an inspiration for people to be more like us in methods of work and ways of living."<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Olga Akrimon to Monica High, 28 May 1947 and Olga Akrimon to Monica High, 10 July 1947, in

Many women from local clubs also complied with the desire of state leaders that they become involved with agricultural issues. Women were particularly interested in the promotion of consumer goods. In 1955, for example, women of the Freedom Township Women's Club held a meat cookery demonstration in Emmetsburg, the nearest town, where they distributed posters, recipes, and leaflets to urban women for the purpose of promoting beef and pork. And even if they did not directly participate in community activities, clubwomen also used the information from meetings to write letters to IFBF President, E. Howard Hill, as well as the editor of the *Spokesman*, to expressed concerns for agricultural policies. In 1955, Ruth van Alstine of Cedar Rapids offered Hill her advice on natural soil conservation methods, and even enclosed a pamphlet she suggested be distributed at Farm Bureau meetings. She closed her letter with the comment, "Far-seeing, visionary citizens have got to take action." That same year, agricultural surpluses became the leading issue in letters to the *Spokesman*; Iowa farm wife Rose M. Gregory urged farmers to control production and prevent surpluses, since she believed that over production had a more detrimental affect on small farmers.<sup>172</sup>

As the economic situation deteriorated in 1956, Mrs. L. Gustafson of Storm Lake, Iowa wrote a scathing letter directly blaming Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson for surpluses and depressed prices. Likewise, Mrs. Horace Thie of Mediapolis, Iowa, criticized the IFBF for not working harder to secure better prices, and for standing behind Benson when he was "so unpopular with the farmer." The same year, when *Spokesman* editor Dan

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Freedom Township Women's Club Scrapbook, 1947-1948; "Palo Alto County Rural Women's Day Program," in Freedom Township Women's Club Scrapbook, 1954, in Freedom Township Women's Club Records, IWA.

<sup>172</sup> Freedom Township Women's Club Scrapbook, 1955, Freedom Township Women's Club, IWA; Ruth van Alstine to E. Howard Hill (4 October 1955), E. Howard Hill papers, RS 21/7/4, University Archives, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa (Hereafter Cited as Hill Papers); *Spokesman*, 22, no 10 (5 November 1955) 2.

Murphy asked members to write to suggest ways that farmers might improve rural-urban relations, letters from women filled the editorial page of the *Spokesman* for two months. One of these women, Mrs. Dean Boilbaugh of Eddyville, Iowa believed that the rapid modernization of agriculture had “confused not only city folks but also those of us who are on the farms.” She also suggested the IFBF use modern technology to promote farm tours and broadcast panel discussions on television.<sup>173</sup>

In 1960, women still wrote with concern for agricultural surpluses. Mrs. Harold W. Olson of Winfield, Iowa wrote argued that programs to limit production needed to be compulsory because farmers, politicians, and middlemen could never cooperate voluntarily. At the end of her letter, she added, “I wouldn’t be a typical farm wife if I didn’t add the following comment: If we ever did find a way to cut farm production that would be the year we’d have a big crop failure. My, what a howling and growling there would be!” Women also recognized how new technologies had affected their livelihoods. Mrs. Donald Fredricks, a poultry farmer from Wall Lake, Iowa, believed that poultry farmers lost control of their industry once technology and working on contract with large companies allowed them to expand operations. She worried that poultry producers would “expand themselves right out of a market.”<sup>174</sup>

Women’s vocal concern remained constant through the next decade, and each year the IFBFWC renewed a commitment to agricultural issues in their annual programs. In 1964, for example, the authors of the handbook asserted, “The women's portion of the program is an integral part of the organization. It is not an auxiliary -- farm women ARE JUST AS

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<sup>173</sup> *Spokesman*, 22; no 30 (24 March 1956) 4; 23, no.6 (13 October 1965) 4; 23, no. 3 (September 22, 1956) 4.

<sup>174</sup> *Spokesman*, 26, no 51 (20 August 1960) 4; *Spokesman* 28, no 11 (18 November 1961) 4;

INTERESTED IN good live stock prices, sound reapportionment, and property tax relief as their husbands.” Within this spirit, in 1966, the women of Buchanan County, Iowa held a lady’s tractor driving school to promote farm safety. The driving instructor, Norval Wardle, an agricultural engineer from Iowa State University, told the women that they should insist upon learning how to drive a tractor and should “not expect their husbands to know everything.” Yet when Wardle asked the class of sixteen women who among them had experience driving a tractor, all sixteen raised their hands.<sup>175</sup>

In other instances, farm wives revealed they were already well aware of their roles in farm management. In a letter to the editor of the *Spokesman* in 1970, Mrs. D. Hutson, a farm wife of Logan, Iowa, wrote about her and her husband’s struggle to establish a farming operation. Her wages contributed to a down payment on 160 acres of land, and she attended all meetings with bankers and lenders. She wrote: “My husband and I worked about 24 hours a day trying to make a living... We have shoveled manure out of the barns 2 feet thick, tried to fix old fences, buildings, do chores in winter at night half frozen. I wonder if we had it to do all over we’d tackle it again.” Hutson’s letter illustrates that fact that although technology greatly improved standards of living, agriculture was still an uncertain and difficult enterprise, where agricultural policies, credit systems, and market conditions affected the activities of men and women alike. Though she worked for wages, Hutson consistently used the pronoun “we” when referring to farm work, and none of the women who wrote into the *Spokesman* ever expressed the idea that their husbands alone held ownership of the farm. This is not to imply that mutual marital relationships existed on all farms, however, only that

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<sup>175</sup> Iowa Farm Bureau Women’s Committee Handbook (1964-1965) IFBFWC Records ; “New Ideas With Pork,” *Spokesman* 30, no. 21 (25 January 1964) 12; “Rural Women Learn Safe Tractor Operation,” *Spokesman*, 33, no 42 (18 June 1966) 12.



technology and improved farm homes did not seem to diminish the vested interest that many women took in the farming operation.<sup>176</sup>

There is also ample evidence to show that the clubs affiliated with the IFBFWC and the MEHA, because of their association with a larger organization, were considerably more political and service-oriented than informal neighborhood clubs for women with no affiliation to another group. Typical of these informal clubs was the Friendly Neighbors Club, formed in September 1952 by thirteen farm women near Deep River, Iowa. They elected officers, drew up their own by-laws, and even decided on geographical boundaries to limit membership to local residents. They defined these boundaries not by roads or official landmarks, but rather on the basis of family farm locations. Membership was by invitation only, though members extended a broad invitation to all women living within the boundary, and they provided invitations to all new women moving into the neighborhood.

Like clubs associated with the IFBFWC and the MEHA, the Friendly Neighbors Club held monthly meetings, followed parliamentary procedure, and collected twenty-five cent dues. Members also used "Roll Calls," or questions to be answered by members at each meeting. The first "Roll Call," in January 1953, for example, asked members to name "an interesting or very useful product." These "Roll Calls" prompted discussion, allowed women to share what they knew, and often provided some comic relief. The main purpose of the club, however, was to provide service and support to members, particularly at times of birth, illness, or death. At their monthly, all-day meetings, the women often pitched in to help the hostess with chores, they held exchanges of dish towels, plants, and recipes, and they sent cards, food, flowers, and gifts to those needing support. They also held neighborhood events

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<sup>176</sup> *Spokesman* 36, no. 39 (May 30, 1970) 4.

for entire families, with large Thanksgiving celebrations, welcome parties for new families, and going-away parties for those moving out of the area.<sup>177</sup>

Beginning in the spring of 1953, the Friendly Neighbors Club sponsored some limited service projects and usually sent materials or crafts to homes for veterans, the disabled, or for children. Still, the club continued to operate primarily as a social group. Members did not include an educational component in their meetings until 1957. In January, members decided as a group that they wanted to know more about the topic of civil defense. They wrote the federal government for information and used the materials they received to study the topic throughout the spring of that year. Then, in September 1958, they took a trip to Oskaloosa, Iowa not only to shop and eat at a restaurant, but also to tour the Milky Way Dairy, Oskaloosa Clay Products, the municipal water plant, the KBOE radio station, and the Ideal Manufacturing Company. Beyond this, however, educational activities were limited to the desires of the members and the meeting minutes did not indicate that any members sought to make education or politics the focus of the club. Though the Friendly Neighbors Club, and others like it, served essentially the same purpose as those associated with the IFBFWC or the MEHA, there were clear distinctions. Informal clubs did not provide the same opportunities for community service, nor did they provide members with the rhetoric of leaders who desired women to take a more public role in civic activities.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> "Friendly Neighbors Club, Meeting Minutes, 1952-1953," in the Friendly Neighbors Club, Deep River, Iowa, Records, Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.

<sup>178</sup> Meeting minutes, photographs, and letter from Marie L. Carter, Superintendent of the Training School for Girls in Mitchellville, Iowa to Mrs. Harold Piersel, 7 December 1954, in Friendly Neighbors Club Scrapbook, 1952-1963, Friendly Neighbors Club, Deep River, Iowa, Records, Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.

It is interesting to note that their service projects tended to focus on institutions outside of their immediate neighborhood. In 1954, for example, the Friendly Neighbors Club sent a variety of fabrics to the Training School for Girls in Mitchellville, Iowa. In a letter of thanks, Marie L. Carter, superintendent of the school, wrote that the girls would receive pieces of fabric as Christmas gifts, and they would use them to make

This is not to say that the women's clubs affiliated with the IFBFWC and the MEHA attracted more "politicized" women. Despite the ambitions of state leaders, most women who joined clubs affiliated with the IFBFWC or the MEHA did not usually express a pronounced interest in agriculture and politics. They were more likely to participate in political, civic, and service activities than those in informal clubs, but only because state leaders provided a ready framework for those types of activities. The tendency for local clubs to exist as social groups may be best illustrated by one verse in the club song of the Freedom Township Women's Club, in Palo Alto County, Iowa. Written in the mid-1920s, and sung by members for decades, it went as follows: "And then we have our ladies club/of which we're very glad / For there we learn to do our work / and still have time to gad." Similarly, a poem composed for the 1 June 1955 meeting of the Cedar Valley Community Club in Muscatine County, Iowa, clearly shows expectations not for learning and political activity, but rather relaxation. It read: "Take it easy, it's time to relax -- / Come to club in shorts or slacks. / You can lounge in a chair / or sit on the floor; / You can do your hair / if it isn't a bore. / Loaf or take some time to mend a dress, / perhaps there's something I could press? / Bev Blair's the hostess / And she's as tired as can be. / So come and loaf and enjoy yourself too."<sup>179</sup>

In general, an examination of the regular meeting minutes and scrapbooks shows that women in local clubs favored activities centered on new trends in homemaking over those focused on politics or specific issues. For example, at their September 1958 meeting, the women of the Franklin Township Women's Club in O'Brien County selected meeting topics for the coming year. These included topics geared toward new technologies and consumer

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clothing items. Carter was particularly thankful because the variety of fabrics would allow the girls to make unique items and allow them to express their individuality.

<sup>179</sup> Freedom Township Women's Club Scrapbook, 1923-1926, Freedom Township Women's Club Records, IWA; Cedar Valley Community Club Yearbook, 1955, Cedar Valley Community Club Records, IWA.

goods, including freezing foods, accessories in the home, cookie delights, making children's clothing, care and laundering new garments, landscaping, and kitchen work savers. Women also wanted information on new, synthetic textiles, eliminating household pests with chemical pesticides, the latest information on nutrition, including low-calorie refreshments.

In 1960, the programs the women of the Cleona Township Women's Club, in Scott County, Iowa, selected illustrate more specifically the independence women's clubs exercised when selecting activities. That year, the state leaders of the IFBFWC elected to make civil defense and emergency preparation the theme of monthly activities. State leaders suggested twelve monthly programs for local clubs including: "What is Civil Defense Mobilization;" and "What is radioactive fallout and how can we protect ourselves?" They also suggested that members take a Red Cross First Aid Training Course, learn about home fallout shelters, watch films on civil defense, learn about atomic science, and construct home first-aid kits. The women of Cleona Township on the other hand decided on programs such as "Know your retail stores," "Better grooming," "Figure flattery," and "Research on food nutrients." They also spent one meeting sewing carpet squares for disabled children, they held an organizational tea, and in December, rather than taking a quiz on civil defense state leaders suggested, they hosted a township Christmas party. Only twice did they comply with the state programs: in May 1960 they took a tour of the Rock Island Arsenal to view a mobile hospital, and in October they assembled home first-aid kits. Otherwise, the women of Cleona Township appeared to have few reservations about selecting programs that differed

significantly from those recommended by the IFBFWC, and their program selection was typical of women's clubs across the state.<sup>180</sup>

State leaders of both the IFBFWC and the MEHA understood that the ability to exercise such local control was an important part of keeping members interested in club activities. Yet there were other factors affecting membership and participation that were often beyond the control of state leaders, namely local leadership, individual work schedules, family, and economic realities. Despite considerable evidence that women highly valued their membership, membership rosters from clubs in Iowa and Missouri during the late 1950s and early 1960s show that most women did not attend meetings on a regular basis. For example, between October 1959 and June 1960, of the 21 members listed on the roll for the Franklin Township Women's Club in O'Brien County, Iowa, only one had perfect attendance. Three members missed two meetings or less, ten missed between three and five meetings, while seven missed more than six meetings. The women who tended to miss meetings, however, usually participated in major events such as potluck suppers, achievement days, and community events.<sup>181</sup>

The Midway Home Boosters, near Midway, Missouri, in the north central area of the state, had similar attendance patterns. Founded in 1946 with just eight members, the club grew quickly and included farm women from this small town, just seven miles from the

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<sup>180</sup> "1960 Annual Program," in Cleona Township Women's Club Scrapbook, 1960-1974, in Cleona Township Women's Club Records, Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.

<sup>181</sup> Membership Roll, October 1959 to June 1960, Franklin Township Women's Club Records, IWA. One more example to show the widespread nature of these attendance figures, see also the records of the Highland Do-Better Club, also in O'Brien County, Iowa, where again, there were similar attendance patterns in 1960. That year, when the club had thirty members and held nine meetings, meetings had an average attendance of just 13.75 members. The highest number of members, seventeen and sixteen respectively, attended during the winter months of January and February. Attendance tended to decline as warmer weather, planting, and harvest demanded more time. Members recognized this trend and did not even schedule meetings between June and August. See Membership Roll, December 1959 to December 1960, Highland Do-Better Club Records, IWA.

major city of Columbia, as well as a handful of retired farm women who had moved into town. Over a twenty-year period, between 1952 and 1972, the Midway Home Boosters had an average of seventeen members. These numbers peaked at a high of twenty-five members in 1955 and 1956, and reached a low of eleven members in 1965. Throughout this period, average attendance was 10.8 members per meeting, or approximately 63 percent of members in attendance. And even when membership was high, ranging between 20 and 25 members, average attendance was never more than 73 percent. Average attendance was actually highest in 1967, at 84 percent, when there were just thirteen members. These statistics indicate then that the number of members did not necessarily mean a club was more or less active. The level of activity in a particular club depended more on leadership and member participation rather than on numbers alone.<sup>182</sup>

Local clubs often relied on a core group of members to serve as leaders, though in some cases it appears that this core group of leaders was quite fluid. A survey of officers and chairpersons in the Mahaska County Farm Bureau Women's Club, in Mahaska County, Iowa between 1936 and 1971 found that over thirty-five years, 101 different women took on leadership roles, many serving in a variety of different offices, when approximately ten offices were available each year. This is not a sign of instability, as Mahaska County was highly active and was home to many state leaders. In general, women moved between leadership positions on the county and township levels with considerable ease.

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<sup>182</sup> "History," in Midway Home Boosters Scrapbook, 1946-1958, and "Record: Women's Home Economics Extension Clubs, 1951-1952," through "Record: Women's Home Economics Extension Clubs, 1971-1972," published by the Agricultural Extension Service, University of Missouri College of Agriculture, in Missouri Extension Homemakers Association, Midway Home Boosters, Records, WUNP 5602, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, MO.

On the other hand, the Midway Home Boosters had a core group of leaders who, during the 1950s, tended to simply trade leadership positions rather than allow new members to step in. Between 1952 and 1966, fifty-two different women served one-year terms as leaders in ten different offices. During that same fourteen-year period, however, only seven different women served as president. Only seven served as vice-president, and seven served as secretary. It is not a coincidence, then, that in this period, there were six women who served in all three offices at one time or another, and all six appeared to simply cycle through offices. For example, Leona Turner, who emerged as a clear leader in the group and maintained her membership for thirty-seven years until her death in 1983, served as president in 1953 and 1954, then as secretary between 1955 and 1957, and then as president again from 1961 to 1964. Likewise, Mary Lou Henderson served as vice president in 1952, then secretary in 1953 and 1954. She became vice president again in 1955, then served as president in 1956 and 1957. While there was a small group of core leaders, most members of the Midway Home Boosters served as project chairpersons who oversaw one small part of the group's activities. It was not uncommon, however, for women in the core group to also hold these offices at the same time that they held executive positions.<sup>183</sup>

At least in the case of the Midway Home Boosters, there is evidence to suggest that women in the core group were also community leaders who lived on fairly prosperous farms. Leona Hall Turner, for example, was an incredibly unique farm woman. As a child she developed rheumatic fever, losing one eye and the full use of one leg. Turner made a strong recovery however, and despite the fact that she used crutches, she quickly "returned to

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<sup>183</sup> "Record: Women's Home Economics Extension Clubs, 1951-1952," through "Record: Women's Home Economics Extension Clubs, 1965-1966," published by the Agricultural Extension Service, University of Missouri College of Agriculture, in Missouri Extension Homemakers Association, Midway Home Boosters, Records, WUNP 5602, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, MO.

competing in foot races with the boys.” At the age of thirty-two, following the death of her parents, she married Charles F. Turner, who lost his sight at the age of nine after falling off of a barn. Despite these disabilities, the Turners managed a highly successful thirty-acre farm near Midway where they raised livestock and poultry. Charles, whose passion was smoked hams, was well known in the region for his prized hogs and hams. For several years he served as the Boone County Fair Ham Chairman, and he also earned a considerable income as a piano tuner. The couple had no children, and Leona devoted considerable time to the Midway Home Boosters. She often offered her home as a meeting place and led the educational programs for the club.<sup>184</sup>

Mary Lou Henderson, another leader in the Midway Home Boosters, had a long history of community service. In 1974 when Henderson and her husband, Lance, received a Boone County Fair Board Citation of Merit for Honorable and Distinguished Service, it was clear that she and her husband considered themselves to be civic leaders. In addition to farming 2,200 acres, Henderson and her husband ran the Henderson Implement Company for thirty-eight years until they retired in 1973. Furthermore, Lance Henderson served on the county fair board, the Soil Conservation Service State Watershed Board, the Midway School Board, and the board of the Midway Methodist Church. He also served as treasurer of the Boone County Central Democratic Committee for twenty-four years. The couple’s prosperity was also evident in a 1958 news article that featured their new, ranch style home. Entitled, “Let’s Visit the Lance Hendersons on Route J,” the article described every detail of the spacious, three-bedroom Henderson home, noting that “every imaginable facet of comfort

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<sup>184</sup> Alexis Simendinger, “Shared Memories: Friends Suffer as Two Sisters Die in 43 Hours,” *The Columbia Missourian* (9 January 1983), in Missouri Extension Homemakers Association, Midway Home Boosters, Records, WUNP 5602, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, MO.



has been designed into this large buff brick ranch house without compromising one bit of beauty.” The home, full of antiques and family heirlooms, as well as “modern furniture” and a two-way fire place, also featured a spacious utility room with a washer, dryer, and space for ironing. The article concluded, “Country living really has its advantages if one lived in a home like the Hendersons.”<sup>185</sup>

The presence of a strong core group did not appear to greatly affect the purpose and goals of the Midway Home Boosters as an MEHA club, while the presence of community leaders whose families had substantial wealth did not seem to alter the collective club identity as a group of rural “farm women.” The Midway Home Boosters maintained an agenda typical of women’s clubs in Iowa and Missouri. That the leaders tended to be fairly ambitious and interested in community affairs enabled the club to remain active and meet the state “Standard of Excellence” each year. In 1958, for example, the clubwomen contributed a booth to the county fair, attended the Boone County Achievement Day, which showcased the women’s achievements, and held a neighborhood Christmas party. They also scheduled

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<sup>185</sup> “Let’s Visit the Lance Hendersons on Route J,” unattributed news clipping in scrapbook, 1958, Missouri Extension Homemakers Association, Midway Home Boosters, Records, WUNP 5602, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, MO.

This should not imply that simply having material wealth would propel women into leadership positions. There is evidence to suggest that even women with significant resources did not always desire to lead local groups. Leona Koch was a founding member of the Midway Home Boosters and the daughter of another founding member. She was active in the Midway Home Boosters throughout the 1950s, serving as a project chairperson in 1954 and 1955. During the 1960s, she dropped her membership and returned to work as a third grade teacher. Though she was not an official member, she often attended meetings and gave presentations on her work and travels. The prosperity of her farm was evident in a 1957 article in the *Missouri Ruralist*. Koch and her husband, Virgil, finished the basement in their new ranch home to be a local recreation center for Midway’s youth, particularly the Koch’s seventeen-year-old son, Jerry. The basement, which measured thirty by fifty-two feet, featured a record player, table tennis, and a giant “checker board and shuffleboard made from inlaid tiles.” With a “coke bar,” and a wide selection of books and games, the Koch’s basement had “everything to make all the neighborhood young folks happy without going to town for their fun.” Leona, a 4-H leader and an adult leader in the Methodist Youth Fellowship Program, held meetings and parties in the basement. See Florence McKinney, “A Basement Goes Modern,” *Missouri Ruralist* (28 September 1957), in Missouri Extension Homemakers Association, Midway Home Boosters, Records, WUNP 5602, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, MO.

monthly programs on various topics, including rug braiding, basic tailoring, lawn landscaping, and the importance of educating consumers on the production of agricultural goods. They studied “diets to fit the waistline,” mental health issues, and probate court procedures, which included a trip to the county court house. They also invited guest speakers, including Mrs. J. Bernard Gibbs, who talked about living in Belgrade from 1930 to 1933 when her husband served as an agricultural attaché. In 1958, the Midway Home Boosters participated in a state-wide MEHA campaign to curb litter, and they won a blue ribbon for a civil defense display at the Boone County Fair. They clearly maintained a lively program that catered to a wide audience. By the end of the decade, though, the Midway Home Boosters faced declining membership. This was not entirely the fault of the exclusivity of a core group of leaders, and the inability of new members to take on leadership roles, but more likely occurred as the result of changes in rural society.<sup>186</sup>

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, farm women and the programs they desired had clearly changed. Though women primarily demanded programs dedicated to the family and the home throughout the 1950s and 1960s, this was an important period of transition for both the IFBFWC and the MEHA. For women’s organizations associated with the Farm Bureau and the Extension Service the greatest challenge of the 1950s was continuing meaningful and relevant programs for women and families. This meant altering standards and expectations as more women worked outside the home, women demanded to know more about appliances and modern housekeeping, and as fewer young women expressed interest in club membership.

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<sup>186</sup> Record: Women’s Home Economics Extension Clubs, 1956-1957,” through “Record: Women’s Home Economics Extension Clubs, 1957-1958,” published by the Agricultural Extension Service, University of Missouri College of Agriculture, in Missouri Extension Homemakers Association, Midway Home Boosters, Records, WUNP 5602, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, MO.

In Iowa, the situation was further complicated in 1955, when the state legislature ordered the Farm Bureau to withdraw its support of Extension activities. The separation of the Extension Service and the Farm Bureau was highly controversial, and both members of the Farm Bureau and Extension workers expressed resistance to the new policy. Under the provisions of the Farm Aid Association Law, passed in 1913, the Extension Service and the Farm Bureaus enjoyed a close relationship for over forty years. The law required each county to create a farm bureau to act as a sponsoring organization, and by 1951, the county farm bureaus in Iowa provided 34.83 percent of the annual budget for Extension; county governments provided 26 percent of the budget, while state and federal monies accounted for the remaining 39 percent. In Iowa, the IFBFWC had relied almost completely on the efforts of Extension Agents to establish the training school system and strong leadership networks, while the Agents themselves had an active role in securing membership numbers. According to historian Dorothy Schwieder, this relationship, at least in Iowa, was a “continuing source of controversy and misunderstanding,” because many Iowans assumed that to take advantage of Extension programs they had to be members of the IFBF. Agents did little to dispel this misconception because the Farm Bureau not only paid part of their salary, but to qualify for county tax money, the Agents had to secure at least two hundred Farm Bureau memberships.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Memorandum: "Funds Expended in 1951 for County Extension Program," IFBF Records. The dollar amounts were as follows: County Farm Bureaus contributed \$468,417.06; County governments contributed \$350,732.31; and State and Federal monies added up to \$525,444.18, for a total of \$1,344, 593.55; Dorothy Schwieder, "Cooperative Extension and Rural Iowa: Agricultural Adjustment in the 1950s," *Annals of Iowa* 51 (Fall 1992), 606-607. By this time, only Iowa and Illinois maintained a truly cooperative and financially dependent relationship with the Extension Service, while nearly every other state either voluntarily ended their support, or did so because of state legislation. A 1950 survey by the IFBF found that Farm Bureaus and the Extension Services in eight states had "very cooperative" relationships, in seventeen they were described as "very close," "varied" in two, "fair" in nine, and "poor" in six. So although Iowa was one of the last states to

When Benson first ordered the “divorce” between the Farm Bureau and the Extension Service, IFBF leaders did not act immediately. Five days after Benson issued his memorandum, state president E. Howard Hill sent a letter to county Farm Bureau presidents advising them “not to move to hastily.” He wrote: “Any changes that we might decide to make as a result of this Policy Statement on the part of the Department of Agriculture would probably involve some changes in state legislation. Consequently, no changes could be effective before July 1, 1955, and even possibly not before Jan 1, 1956.” Rather, Farm Bureau leaders put up limited resistance, in the form of editorials and internal memoranda, until the Iowa Legislature passed the County Agricultural Extension Law, which became effective 1 July 1955. The new law required counties to establish county councils, in place of county Farm Bureau boards, to oversee Extension programs. Leaders of the IFBF did not launch a fierce campaign against such legislation because the organization actually received a significant financial gain. Though leaders and members argued that county taxes would increase to fund the new county councils, the Farm Bureau actually stood to save six or seven thousand dollars per county per year, a savings that would help the IFBF expand its own programs.<sup>188</sup>

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sever financial ties, close relationships continued to exist in other states. Memorandum: “State Farm Bureau-Extension Relationships,” (1950), IFBF Records.

<sup>188</sup> E. Howard Hill to County Farm Bureau Presidents (29 November 1954) IFBF Records; Schwieder, “Cooperative Extension and Rural Iowa,” 606.

In addition to the financial benefits, the Farm Bureaus in many counties retained a close administrative relationship with the Extension Service. For example, in Page County, Iowa, where the Farm Bureau and the Extension shared an office building, they simply erected a four-and-a-half foot partition between their offices. The Extension Service in Black Hawk County, Iowa, unable to purchase office equipment, decided to use Farm Bureau desk lamps and chairs “until they could afford to buy new,” while in Pocahontas County, Iowa, the Farm Bureau loaned its meeting hall to the Extension Service “without charge.”

County Extension workers reported minimal disruption in 1955, when they were required to establish the new county councils. In many instances, the first County Agricultural Extension Councils consisted of Farm Bureau members who were already experienced in the administration of Extension programs, including drawing budgets, hiring and firing of county workers, supervising expenditures, and holding elections. In Allamakee County, Iowa, where the change was “willingly and graciously accepted by the people of the county,” the new

At the 1955 Summer Conference, state leaders of the IFBFWC expressed some apprehension at the impending separation, but urged the general membership to accept the changes. While she expected programs to remain essentially the same, IFBFWC chairperson

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county council was made up of “proven leaders who have always taken a keen interest and given willingly of their time and effort in carrying out Extension programs.” In order to select candidates for election to the Appanoose County council, Extension personnel selected two men and one woman to serve on a nominating committee. Another committee, which included the county Farm Bureau president and women’s chairperson, then approved the nominations. In the end, candidates included the wives of the county Farm Bureau president and vice president, while the wives of many Farm Bureau officers served on various committees under the jurisdiction of the council. At least in Appanoose County, Iowa, the new county councils seemed to open up leadership opportunities to women.

The Extension service also continued to rely on women to carry out their home economics programs, as well as their new Family and Home Development Program, which encouraged greater cooperation between husbands and wives. Many counties set up Family Living Committees, which consisted of twelve women, and the chair of the County Farm Bureau Women’s Committee. Extension directors in Hamilton County and Palo Alto County, Iowa, for example, reported the essential role of Farm Bureau women in promoting home economics and training schools, though director R.W. Ashby of Palo Alto County was sure to emphasize that there was “no legal connection” between the two organizations. In other counties, though, Extension personnel attempted to expand their reach and made greater efforts to include women from other farm organizations and urban areas. Members of the National Farmers’ Organization in Pocahontas County, Iowa began to attend Extension educational programs in 1956, while in East Pottawattamie County, Home Economist Elizabeth Bornholdt was pleased to report that more women from other organizations were participating in the Family Living Committee. The Farm and Home Development Program (FHDP), begun in 1954 and developed through successive decades, combined different aspects of the agricultural, home economics, and youth programs. It was designed to counsel young families on shared financial decision-making and family goal setting. The program encouraged husbands and wives view the farm as a family business, and to work together in managing the farm and home.

The creation of the Family Living Committees enabled both farm and non-farm women to participate on larger scale, without feeling obligated to pay for Farm Bureau memberships. Though there are no statistics to indicate the proportion of Farm Bureau members who participated in Extension programs before and after the separation, the comments of Extension personnel and an increase in activities geared toward urban residents would indicate that over time Farm Bureau women lost their monopoly on the Extension Service. Not only did non-Farm Bureau members assume leadership positions on Family Living Committees, but also they were limited to activities on the county level. Between the 1920s and early 1950s, when the Farm Bureau women dominated Extension activities, the home economists exposed rural women to leadership opportunities that extended from the local to the national, and in some cases, the international levels, which ultimately offered mobility for farm women to rise through the ranks of the organization. Though the IFBFWC still maintained its leadership networks after 1955, and a close relationship with Extension personnel, it no longer retained the exclusive right to publicize Farm Bureau activities or recruit members.

See Harold W. Anderson, IFBF Fieldman, Page County, to Guy Gilchrist, IFBF (13 January 1956), IFBF Records; “Black Hawk County,” *ANR* (State of Iowa, 1955) 100; “Pocahontas County,” *ANR* (State of Iowa, 1956) 26; “Allamakee County,” *ANR* (State of Iowa, 1955) 58; “Appanoose County,” *ANR* (State of Iowa, 1955) 33; “Hamilton County,” *ANR* (State of Iowa, 1955) 12; “Palo Alto County,” *ANR* (State of Iowa, 1956) 23; “Pocahontas County,” *ANR* (State of Iowa, 1956) 26; “East Pottawattamie County,” *ANR* (State of Iowa, 1956) 7; Dorothy Schweider, *75 Years of Service: Cooperative Extension in Iowa* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1993) 196.

Christine Inman asked for more women to take on leadership roles in the IFBF. In one speech at the conference, she said, “We have a tremendous responsibility to make policy and to carry it out. We need leadership. We must develop people dedicated to carrying out our plans.”<sup>189</sup>

In 1955, the IFBF complied with Inman’s request and attempted to offset the problem of retaining members by creating a Department of Leadership. Headed by Fay Meade, the new department took charge of member education, distribution of materials, leadership training, and improvement of local meetings. In place of Extension-run leadership schools, the IFBF now sponsored local “For’em” sessions, meetings of eight or twelve families to discuss agricultural and public policy issues. Through these family meetings, the Department of Leadership made special efforts to reach out to women and to young married couples. Still, throughout the next decade the IFBFWC expressed concerns over the shrinking pool of potential leaders, especially as the work patterns of farm women began to encompass urban wage work. At the 1969 Summer Conference, Mrs. Frances Mapes and Mrs. Orvie Fischer proposed that county women's committees take more steps to recruit farm wives under 30, and to hold evening meetings, or early breakfast meetings, in order to accommodate women with off-farm jobs.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Mrs. I. J. Bulyer, Cherokee County, “Looking Both Ways,” in “The Summer Echo,” published during the IFBFWC Summer Conference, (27 June 1955), Irene Hoover Papers, Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.

<sup>190</sup> “Developing Farm Bureau Leaders is Job for New IFBF Department,” *Spokesman* 21, no. 32 (1 January 1955) 3; Summer Conference Booklet, Iowa Farm Bureau Women’s Committee Summer Conference (1969) IFBFWC Records. Leaders in either organization never completely severed their ties. Extension Director R.K. Bliss did not favor separation from the Farm Bureau, and he continued to contribute articles to the *Spokesman* into the 1960s. As late as 1970, a close relationship between the two organizations was still evident. At the 1970 Summer Conference, Louise Rosenfeld, Assistant Director of Extension at Iowa State University gave a speech in which she said, “The Farm Bureau women's programming can correlate with extension programming. There is a whole set of relationships, so many programs to work with.” Despite comments such as this, the Farm Bureau had taken over its own leadership training and responsibility for sustaining

This transition was not confined to Iowa, however, and the MEHA also faced significant changes even though it continued its relationship with the Extension Service. By the mid-1950s, state MEHA leaders began to question the effectiveness of the “Standard of Excellence” first introduced in 1929. One history of the organization noted that by mid-century, affiliated clubs had “changed from typically rural groups to a rural-urban group in many places and from a group of young in-experienced club members to a group with members having long tenure in Extension Club work and the average age much older.” Seasoned members, many of whom had completed the same lessons several times and participated in similar projects year after year, began to question the need for the “Standard of Excellence.” One 1955 survey of clubwomen found that only about 10 percent of women enrolled in Extension clubs were under thirty years of age, and as experienced homemakers they demanded more local control over their activities.

It was not that clubwomen did not want to meet the “Standard of Excellence,” because during the 1950s, the number of clubs in compliance with the “Standard” reached an all-time high of 67 percent in 1956, compared to just 25 percent in 1936. Membership also peaked during this period, in 1953, reaching 46,507 members in 2,593 clubs. Membership, as well as the number of clubs wavered during the Depression and the war years, averaging about 2,000 clubs, with less than 40,000 members across the state each year. Yet postwar prosperity brought about new growth for rural women’s clubs. Farm women also had higher standards for living and working conditions, and they wanted Extension programs that reflected these new expectations. Finally, as more clubs complied with the “Standard of

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membership, removing the need for Extension support. Summer Conference Booklet, Iowa Farm Bureau Women’s Committee Summer Conference (1970) IFBFWC Records.

Excellence,” and participated in programs mandated by state leaders, local members gained experience, had the means to finance and participate in community improvement projects, and over time, their demands for independence and local control increased.

At the 1954 MEHA annual business meeting, leaders first discussed doing away with the “Standard of Excellence,” but took no action. Over the next three years, state leaders spoke with county and local leaders on the subject and emphasized that clubs should be more flexible with the “Standard of Excellence.” Rather than asking local women to meet strict standards, state leaders encouraged women to adapt the standard to their local conditions. Their efforts only resulted in growing frustration, and further requests from district leaders that program planning be left up to county boards. So, in August 1957, when the Executive Committee of the MEHA met in Columbia to plan the 1958 programs, they decided to end the “Standard of Excellence,” and with that all state-directed programs. Though the MEHA continued to offer suggestions and advice to local clubs, all program planning took place at the county level. Instead of specific projects, state leaders only issued a guide to county and township clubs on how to select relevant and effective programs. This guide instructed members to “Decide what specific things your club would like to accomplish this year based on your family and community needs.”<sup>191</sup>

Later that month, when the Executive Committee presented the new format at a conference for district representatives, women representing local areas favored the change. Nonetheless, there was some apprehension at the idea of taking on the new responsibility. One report from the conference noted, “It has been said ‘When people do not or cannot

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<sup>191</sup> Minutes of the Business Meeting for the Missouri Home Economics Extension Club Council, 12 August 1957, MEHA Council and Club, Records, WUNP 4319, WHMC.



participate in planning and deciding about matters of importance to them, apathy and indifference result.” However, some women feared that program planning would take too much time, or that county boards did not have the wisdom and experience to make these important decisions. Most expressed excitement the new format would make the clubs more appealing to younger women. State MEHA leaders hoped the change would revitalize members “who were losing interest because the present program was not meeting their need, and who would be interested in the new and challenging approach to club programs.”<sup>192</sup>

At the same time, Extension leaders expressed deep concerns about the absence of young women in Extension clubs. The members of the Midway Home Boosters were no exception. In 1955, for example, nine of the twenty-five members of the club were over the age of 60, while only six were under the age of forty. Seven members were between the ages of forty and fifty, while two were between fifty and sixty. Clearly, the Midway Home Boosters had become a club for older women, and this phenomenon was not unique. A 1957 national study of Extension clubwomen found that only eleven percent of the 11,500 women surveyed were under thirty years old. The majority of Extension clubwomen across the nation, or 51 percent, were between thirty and forty-nine. The study noted that participation levels usually went up for this age group because women between thirty and forty-nine were more likely to have children involved with 4-H and other Extension activities.

Approximately one-fifth, or 21 percent of the women surveyed were between the ages of fifty and fifty-nine, while 19 percent were over the age of sixty. In light of this information,

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<sup>192</sup> “History of the Home Economics Clubs and their Program Planning,” n.d, 5-9 in MEHA Council and Club Records, WUNP 4319, WHMC.

the study noted that Extension leaders needed to make greater efforts to reach out to younger women, particularly those with young children.<sup>193</sup>

To attract younger women, county home demonstration agents and clubwomen asked for more programs “directed to helping families acquire mental rather than physical or manual skills.” They also demanded a new emphasis on the needs of young women, particularly young wives and couples just starting on their own. Missourians also increasingly asked for programs for low-income families, particularly “consumer education, management of human and material resources, and human relations.”<sup>194</sup>

Members of the IFBFWC also asked state leaders for programs more attractive to younger women. In Iowa, clubwomen identified the main problem to be the rising average age of farm operators, and decreasing opportunities for young people to take up farming. In 1950, the average age of farm operators in Iowa was 46, while in 1969 it was 48. This is not a large change in age, but at the same time the number of farms decreased from nearly 195,000 in 1950, to 130,000 in 1970. IFBF members often expressed alarm at the rising start-up expenses of farming for young families, and as early as 1953, the organization advocated job training in rural areas in help marginal farmers find “opportunities outside of agriculture.” In 1970, Mrs. D. Hutson of Logan, Iowa, wrote that her greatest frustration as a young farmer was the “attitudes of older people in the community,” who did not support newcomers. Of her relationships with older neighbors, she wrote:

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<sup>193</sup> “Record: Women’s Home Economics Extension Clubs, 1955” published by the Agricultural Extension Service, University of Missouri College of Agriculture, in Missouri Extension Homemakers Association, Midway Home Boosters, Records, WUNP 5602, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, MO; Fessenden, 4-5.

<sup>194</sup> “Changes in Family Living Programs from 1954-1964,” n.d. in MEHA Council and Club, Records, WUNP 4319, WHMC.

Younger farmers in this area are few and far between, by which I mean fellows in their early 20's. The ones who do farm, their fathers have large holdings, big equipment... Most of the kids who graduate from the school here plan to go to college, or simply go to the city to work. The odds are greatly against anyone starting to farm.

In addition, local insurance companies and banks told Hutson and her husband that they were not entitled to credit or benefits because they had not been farming long enough and did not have enough capital in the business.<sup>195</sup>

Beginning in the 1940s, the IFBF addressed the problems faced by young farmers not through the Women's Committee, but rather through young member advisory committees and programs for "Young Marrieds" under 30. In 1969, the young member advisory committee, which consisted of eight married couples, discussed issues such as land ownership versus tenancy, buying and leasing machinery, organizational participation, the importance of rural communities, and off-farm work. Like the Extension Service Farm and Home Development Program, activities for young couples focused on developing mutual decision making and promoting farming as a family business. The IFBFWC members extended their support to the "Young Marrieds" programs, but they did not always become directly involved. Instead, by the late 1960s, older Farm Bureau women considered these programs as stepping-stones; they hoped that young women would develop leadership skills

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<sup>195</sup> Hanson, et al, "Agriculture in Iowa: Trends from 1935 to 1997," 25, 32. The average age farm operators actually declined slightly between 1974 and 1978, perhaps because this is when the Baby Boom generation came of the appropriate age to begin farming, and also this was when high prices allowed for greater investment in land and machinery. The average age of farmers did not increase dramatically until the 1980s and 1990s, when in 1997 the average stood at 52. That year, farm operators under the age of 35 accounted for less than 10 percent of Iowa farmers, while those over 65 accounted for more than 20 percent; "Farm Bureau's 10-Point Program for Agricultural Prosperity," (Des Moines: Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, 1953), IFBF Records; *Spokesman* 36, no. 39 (May 30, 1970) 4.

as “Young Marrieds,” and then become active in county and state Women’s Committees later.<sup>196</sup>

In many cases, efforts to reach out to younger women worked, and by the mid-1960s, clubs and Extension programs attracted new members. The number of clubs associated with the MEHA increased slightly from 2,159 in 1960 to 2,236 in 1962. During the same period, the number of members also increased from 33,811 to 36,904. The following year, in 1963, the numbers dropped slightly to 2,101 clubs with 34,701 members, but the overall increased appeared to satisfy state leaders. One 1964 report indicated that programs for younger homemakers reached 3,000 women annually, and Extension personnel worked directly with 1,000 young couples each year. The new programs were more in-depth with “an emphasis on principles which have application to everyday problems.” The report indicated that due to more comprehensive training, Extension workers were “better equipped to deal with complex problems.”<sup>197</sup>

In 1966, Dr. Mary Nell Greenwood, the director of Continuing Education for Women in the Missouri Extension Service, spoke to state leaders at a state MEHA meeting. She was confident that Extension clubs had, in fact, changed to meet the needs of modern farm women. Her greatest concern was that clubs assist women in reaching their potential and making good choices for themselves and their families. She said, “If women are to make their *maximum contribution* and be *utilized* in their communities, they must be

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<sup>196</sup> Summer Conference Booklet, Iowa Farm Bureau Women’s Committee Summer Conference (1970) IFBFWC Records; “Young people farm because they like it; join farm groups to have stronger voice,” *Spokesman* 36, no 8 (18 October 1969) 13. According to the article, of the sixteen men and women on the young member advisory committee, several had been to college and half had “some training beyond high school.” The committee also represented a cross section of farmers, and included dairy, hog, beef, and grain farmers, with holdings ranging from 850 acres to 160 acres.

<sup>197</sup> “Changes in Family Living Programs from 1954 to 1964,” (1964) in Missouri Extension Homemakers Association, Council and Club, records, WUNP 4319, WHMC.

knowledgeable of political processes, public issues, economic trends, social changes, etc., and *possess* necessary leadership and communication skills” (emphasis in original). While these sentiments were hardly new, Greenwood’s ideas about how to convey these ideas were very different than just a generation before. She believed Extension programs needed to better utilize women’s skills, take them out into a public arena, and prepare women for “multiple roles – homemaker, citizen, employee, person.” Greenwood concluded, “It is fact – not fiction – change is occurring – change will continue to occur and probably at an accelerated rate.” Extension personnel and clubwomen could not stop these changes, especially those that tended to “separate rather than mold cohesive family units.” On the other hand, they could assist in this period of change by helping women and families to deal with “problems, tensions, and decisions.”<sup>198</sup>

In both Iowa and Missouri, such adjustments to program planning aided in a limited growth of women’s clubs. Between 1961 and 1970, for example, the Sharon Township Women’s Club, in Johnson, County, Iowa lost eight members, but also gained eight new members, and the club held steady at twenty-four women. Of the eight who joined in those years, all eight remained on the membership rolls in 1983 and 1984, illustrating that these members who joined as young women in the 1960s remained committed to the club. Between 1970 and 1980, membership declined from twenty-four women to twenty-one, but the club still gained five new members. And by 1984, membership actually increased to twenty-five, with a gain of three new members, and one former member who renewed her membership. That year, nine of the twenty-five members were older women who had also been members

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<sup>198</sup> Dr. Mary Nell Greenwood, “Change – Fact or Fiction,” an address given at the MEHA State Council Meeting, 13 July 1966, in Missouri Extension Homemakers Association, Council and Club, WUNP 5394, Western Historical Manuscript Center, Columbia, MO.

in 1961, seven joined after 1970, and five joined after 1980, indicating that while women's clubs were typically comprised of women over the age of 30, they continued to attract women from various stages of life.<sup>199</sup>

The Midway Home Boosters experienced a cycle in membership during these years, as new members joined, but also as former members renewed their memberships. Membership in the Midway Home Boosters fell from a high of twenty-five in 1955 to a low of eleven in 1965. While it may at first appear that the club was in a state of decline, the membership rolls actually reveal that the club was in a state of transition when older women left and younger women joined. In 1963, for example, six of the twelve members joined after 1960, three joined between 1955 and 1960, and just 3 joined before 1955. Out of the twelve active members that year, only one was a founding member who joined in 1946. With the arrival of younger members, the minutes of the Midway Home took on a more casual, informal tone. By 1964, women no longer identified themselves using husbands' first names, and they began to favor leisure activities such as crafts, that allowed them to work and socialize simultaneously. In 1966, membership numbers began to climb, and that year there were seventeen members. The younger members took on leadership roles and adjusted the programs to meet their own needs. They were also less likely to come from farming backgrounds. Kathryn Deal, who grew up in Kansas City, joined in 1963 after marrying a Boone County farmer. In 1985, when she was still active in the club, she wrote a column in the *Booneville Daily News*, in which she described herself as a "dumb city girl" who was actually afraid of cows before moving to her husband's dairy farm. Nonetheless, she

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<sup>199</sup> Membership Rolls, 1961, 1970, 1980, 1983-1984, in the Sharon Township Women's Club Records, IWA.

remained a committed member of the Midway Home Boosters for more than two decades, serving as president in 1976.<sup>200</sup>

During the 1970s, a similar transition occurred in the Highland Do-Better Club in O'Brien County, Iowa. Between 1960 and 1970, membership declined from twenty-eight members to sixteen, and the club gained only three new members. During the 1970s, membership actually increased rapidly, and the club gained six new women, all of whom joined separately over the decade. In fact, membership grew significantly by the middle of the decade, reaching a high of 21 members in 1974 and 1975. Yet many of these women did not sustain their membership and by 1980, membership dropped again to just twelve members. In 1983, membership fell to eleven members. Still, two new women joined, and the two of three who were no longer on the membership roll were older members who either retired or died. This data indicates that the membership of these clubs was not static, nor did it follow a particular path with a significant "rise and fall." Rather, clubs experienced ebbs and flows, or periods when membership grew and interest was high. These were followed by periods with fewer members, when older women retired and younger women stepped in to take their place. At first glance, falling membership numbers seem to indicate wavering interest on the part of farm women in activities pertaining to the home and women's clubs.

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<sup>200</sup> "Record: Women's Home Economics Extension Clubs, 1963," and "Record: Women's Home Economics Extension Clubs, 1964," Record: Women's Home Economics Extension Clubs, 1951-1952," published by the Agricultural Extension Service, University of Missouri College of Agriculture, in Missouri Extension Homemakers Association; Dave Para, "What's Cookin' in Boonesville," *Booneville Daily News* (13 January 1982), 14; Kathryn Deal, "A Tremendous Surprise for Cousin Paul," *Booneville Daily News* (26-27 July 1985), 4 in Missouri Extension Homemakers Association, Midway Home Boosters, Records, WUNP 5602, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, MO.

Yet these membership records actually reveal a changing of the guard, as older members ended their activities and younger women assumed more leadership positions.<sup>201</sup>

Overall, the number of farm women in Extension women's clubs and Farm Bureau women's clubs did decline between 1950 and 1980, but what the records from these clubs show is that general interest in clubs remained high among young women. Still, women belonging to local clubs noticed that fewer women joined, and more clubs disbanded over time. They expressed deep concerns for the future of women's clubs, particularly as many of them grew older and faced the challenges of aging. During an interview in the 1980s, one member of the Little Shoal Homemakers in Clay County, Missouri observed that many of the long-time members had been widowed and moved into town. Nonetheless, they still enjoyed meeting up for social reasons because "we have all grown old together." Older women typically explained that younger women tended to work for wages off the farm, and therefore had little time for club activities. When asked about declining memberships, Lela Fann, a fifty-year member of the Martin Woods Club in Clay County, Missouri simply said, "As rural women, we learned to do the things that rural women did. Now, times have changed. Rural women aren't like they used to be." Likewise, in 1985, Fern Still, of the Thomas Hollow Club in Barry County, Missouri, noted that during the 1970s, Barry County had twenty women's clubs. By the mid-1980s, there were just ten. She said, "What happened that made some of our clubs disband? I'm afraid I do not know answers. We're growing older and we have few younger homemakers in our group. So perhaps it is because younger

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<sup>201</sup> Membership rolls, Highland Do-Better Club, 1960-1984, Highland Do-Better Club Records, IWA.



homemakers feel they are needed to help make a living. And with living expenses so high, we can see why that is true.”<sup>202</sup>

At the county and state levels, leaders also blamed off-farm employment for declining membership. In 1987, Joan Larue, chairperson of the Mahaska County Farm Bureau Women’s Club, reported that fewer women were able to make time for club work. She wrote, “This year was a definite challenge with more and more of our Farm Bureau homemakers taking jobs off the farm to help make ends meet. It became a challenge just to fill positions on our women’s committee. But it seems those who are busy are the most willing to help out and so we had several ladies on our board who held full or part time jobs. I do appreciate their willingness throughout the year.” Larue’s comments illustrate a common frustration among club leaders in this period. While many blamed off-farm employment for declining membership, many women who worked off the farm continued to be active. In fact, a 1980 survey of American farm women found that 74 percent were involved with some type of farm or community organization, and 41 percent of these were involved with a general farm organization like the IFBF, or a women’s auxiliary of a general farm organization. By 1980 then, even with the introduction of commodity groups, marketing organizations, and political groups, small clubs and general agricultural organizations were still the most popular type of agricultural organization available to farm women. In her examination of data, sociologist Rachel Ann Rosenfeld found that employment had little to do with women’s participation in voluntary organizations or Extension activities. Rather, Rosenfeld observed that involvement depended more on a woman’s connection to and roles on the family farm. She argued that

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<sup>202</sup> Interview with member of the Little Shoal Homemakers, Clay County, Missouri; Interview with Lela Fann, Barry County, Missouri; and Interview with Fern Still, Clay County Missouri, by Anna Morrow in Missouri Extension Homemakers Association, Oral History Project, WUNP 4650, WHMC.

off-farm employment did “not decrease the chances of belonging to any type of organization.”<sup>203</sup>

The membership rolls, as well as cycles of club growth during the 1970s, support these statistics and show that women’s employment certainly played a role in declining memberships, but it was not the only contributing factor to the overall decline. In fact, by the 1980s, some farm women who worked off the farm turned to women’s clubs for leisure, and as a means to retain their identity and sense of community with other farm women. In 1975, Evelyn Watson and Susie Faerber were both farm women employed at the First Missouri Bank of Gasconade County, in Gasconade County, Missouri, and they shared a mutual interest in “crafts, homemaking, and family.” The existing women’s club near Hermann, Missouri, however, would not admit any new members. Watson and Faerber then began their own club, the Frauenverein Club, with four other women. By 1984, the Frauenverin Club had thirty-seven members and though they usually worked on craft projects, including macramé, they also studied issues such as mental health and international relations. Similarly, in 1982, Charlotte Stiens and several younger women in Nodaway County, Missouri, located in the north west corner, formed the Country Gals Extension Club. They decided to organize after attending a Young Homemaker’s Outreach session at the 1981 MEHA state meeting in

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<sup>203</sup> Joan Larue, “Annual Report: Mahaska County Farm Bureau Women’s Clubs, 1986-1987,” undated, Mahaska County Farm Bureau Women’s Clubs, IWA; Rachel Ann Rosenfeld, *Farm Women: Work, Farm, and Family in the United States* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 198-215.

It is important to note that the 1980 survey also asked both men and women whether they had served on any local governing boards, committees, or panels that shaped policy in their area. 29 percent of women and 23 percent of men served on local Extension program committees, indicating that many women did wish to direct Extension programming in their areas. Compared to other governing bodies, however, women lagged far behind the men. Only 6 percent of women had served on state or county boards, 6 percent served on USDA committees, and 8 percent served on local governing bodies, such as a school board. This is compared to 17 percent of men who served on state or county boards, and 16 percent who served on USDA committees. This illustrates that while many women answered the call of state leaders to become involved with Extension, few utilized the lessons on government and politics in other public roles. See Rosenfeld, 215-225.

Columbia. Though because many of them worked, or had younger children, they elected to hold their meetings one evening per month at the First Midwest Bank in Maryville, the county seat. Like the members of the Frauenverein Club, the Country Gals preferred crafts such as knitting, crocheting, counted cross-stitch, and padded photo frames, though they also made time for educational activities. In 1982 and 1983, they also studied child safety, gardening, hair care, and sexual assault.<sup>204</sup>

These examples illustrate that the women who continued to organize and participate in women's clubs into the 1980s maintained a conservative, traditional agenda similar to that of previous generations. They did so even as some worked for wages off the farm. This raises questions then as to whether younger, educated women avoided women's clubs because of the clubs' traditional values. Yet over time, there is some evidence that while they did not entirely embrace Second Wave Feminism, some members drew from the women's movement and utilized a feminist discourse. As shown in the writings of Bess Newcomer and Christine Inman, some Farm Bureau women had advocated equal pay for equal work since the 1940s and 1950s. In 1969, the women of Clay County addressed women's health when they helped to coordinate pap smear test clinics; over the course of two weekends, nearly 1,400 women attended the clinics, which were the first of their kind in Iowa. At the 1972 Summer Conference, Mrs. Jack Evans from Davenport gave a speech in which she encouraged homemakers to create their own unique identities and find "inner-happiness," while at the Summer Conference in 1974, a woman identified only as Mrs. Conlin, gave a speech specifically about discriminatory laws against women. Conlin urged women to

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<sup>204</sup> "Gasconade County, The History of the Frauenverein Club, 1975-1984," undated audio recording; and "Country Gals Extension Club," undated audio recording in Missouri Extension Homemakers Association, Oral History Project, WUNP 4650, WHMC.

challenge the notion that “only the man works on a farm,” and ended by saying “we need not leave our husbands or quit wearing make-up and bras to join the fight for women’s rights.” Members of the IFBFWC did not enthusiastically take up the feminist cause, but they did begin to address violence against women, sexually transmitted diseases, and women’s health. Most importantly, that fact that they invited such speakers to their conferences indicates they were at least interested in learning about contemporary women’s issues.<sup>205</sup>

While all of this shows that interest in club activities remained high, fewer young women remained in the countryside to join and maintain clubs. By 1986, the MEHA had just 14,446 members, compared to 36,904 in 1962. By 1995, this number stood at just 2,704 women in 257 clubs across the state. It was not that large numbers of women had lost interest, however, there were simply fewer and fewer farm women to join clubs. In 1930, just as the club movement gained momentum in Missouri, 1.1 million people, or 30.5 percent of the entire population, resided on farms. By 1950, as many Missouri club women began to question how they might adapt their programming, the rural farm population in Missouri had declined to 21.8 percent. This trend continued through the post-war period, and in 1990, only 3.5 percent of the state’s population, or 180,097 Missourians, lived on farms. By then, state and local leaders no longer expected women’s clubs to teach practical homemaking and

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<sup>205</sup> “Clay County FB women help promote Pap clinic,” *Spokesman* 35, no. 42 (14 June 1969) 10; Summer Conference Booklet (1972) IFBFWC Records; Summer Conference Booklet (1975) IFBFWC Records.

One issue relevant specific to farm women, the average age of farmers continued to climb, was the law pertaining to inheritance taxes. As many older club women faced widowhood, they sought to learn what they could about their rights as workers and contributors on the farm. In 1976, for example, Mrs. Alvin Korthaus, the vice chairperson of the Cleona Township Women’s Club, told a local reporter that legislators needed to update estate and inheritance tax laws. Using information distributed by the IFBF, Korthaus declared that “Its time to end this evil discrimination,” and she pointed out how widows rarely received credit as agricultural producers. As a result they often paid extremely high estate and inheritance taxes on the death of their husbands. It will become clear in later chapter that this issue spurred many farm women into action, working through political channels to change laws. See unattributed news clipping, 1976, in Cleona Township Women’s Club Scrapbook, 1976, in Cleona Township Women’s Club Records, IWA.

farming skills, or to serve as primary outlets for political and practical information. Rather, by the 1980s and 1990s, women used these clubs to maintain social networks, for leisure, and to remain connected to a rapidly changing way of life. Another reason why fewer women joined was that by the 1980s and 1990s, Extension programming had changed once again, catering to the needs of individuals and families, encouraging Missourians to participate in short-term programs rather than become members in clubs.<sup>206</sup>

By the end of the century, the rural club woman was a rarity. Nonetheless, the period after 1950 marked an important transition in rural America, and by joining women's clubs, farm women found support, information, and friendships that, in some ways, took the place of the local neighborhoods and informal networks that previously characterized rural life. Through their memberships, women had opportunities to learn about current events, agricultural issues, community projects, and the latest trends in homemaking. For many, this was their primary source of information and clubs provided exposure to a broad range of topics. Women in clubs affiliated with the IFBFWC and the MEHA embraced the ideals of state leaders but they also exercised considerable independence in selecting their programs. The overall decline in women's club membership that occurred between 1950 and 1985 is best explained then, by that fact that fewer Americans remained in rural areas. While the state leaders of the IFBFWC and the MEHA successfully adapted their programs to meet the

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<sup>206</sup> *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940*, vol. II, "Population," part 4, "Minnesota-New Mexico," (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1943), 311; *Census of the Population: 1950*, vol. II, "Characteristics of the Population," part 25, "Missouri," (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1952), 43; *U.S. Census Bureau, County and City Data Book* (Washington, D.C., United States Government Printing Office, 2000), 12.

needs of modern farm women, they could not combat depopulation, nor an aging population, in the countryside.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Club membership numbers should not be confused with the number of Missouri residents participating in Extension programs. In 1986, for example, while there were just 14,446 members in women's clubs, Extension personnel reached 1,857,600 non-members. As early as the 1950s and 1960s, Extension leaders recognized that they would be working more with individuals and families who were not members of clubs because many people preferred to participate in individual programs rather than sustained organizations. See: "Missouri Stars in Program Plans for Extension Homemakers: Second Year Accomplishments," published by the Missouri Cooperative Extension Service (July 1986), 4, and "1995 MEHA Membership Enrollment, 24 March 1995," in Missouri Extension Homemakers Association Council and Club, WUNP 5394, WHMC.

## Chapter 4

### “What’s Radical About Forward Thinking?”: Women, Families, and the National Farmers Organization, 1955-1975

One evening, during the late winter of 1958, Luella Zmolek’s husband, Don, announced that he was going to a “farm meeting.” Don had never been involved with any type of agricultural organization, or even expressed interest in farm politics, but Luella gave it little thought. The following evening, Don announced that he was going to yet another “farm meeting.” Then, something seemed “a little bit strange.” She and Don, with their three daughters and three sons, lived on an eighty-acre farm in Black Hawk County, Iowa, near the city of Cedar Falls. The family had experienced several difficult years and struggled to reap profits from their small operation, though again, Luella was well acquainted the hardships of farm life.<sup>208</sup>

Born in 1923, she grew up as one of six children on a farm near Eagle Center, Iowa. Though her mother died when she was sixteen, Luella graduated from high school and became the first in her family to further her education. She enrolled in a nine-month course at Gates Business College, in Waterloo, Iowa, where she lived with her aunt, uncle, and grandmother. Coming from a farm without electricity or plumbed water, she thought that her relatives’ urban home was, “just like moving to heaven.” As she enjoyed modern conveniences, Luella decided that she would never marry a farmer. After completing her business course, she took a job first with a realtor, then with John Deere. During one trip

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<sup>208</sup> Luella Zmolek, interview by Doris Malkmus, 10 September 2001, transcript, Voices From the Land Oral History Collection, Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa (hereafter cited as Voices From the Land).

home to attend a church picnic, however, someone introduced her to Don Zmolek, a farmer.<sup>209</sup>

Married in 1945, when Luella was twenty-one, the young couple rented a farm near Don's widowed mother and began farming in prosperous years. By 1955, however, their situation changed dramatically. That year the price of hogs dropped to ten cents per pound, and for Luella and Don, "that was a really big blow." To make up for the lost income, Don took a job as a foreman at the Swift meatpacking plant in Cedar Falls. Because he worked on the second shift, Luella, as she was pregnant with their sixth child, took care for five children under the age of twelve and performed the evening farm chores. After a few years, however, Don became disenchanted with his job at Swift and one evening came home to tell Luella she needed to find a job so he could farm full time. Within two weeks, she had a job as a typist at the Viking Pump Company in Cedar Falls.<sup>210</sup>

Though overwhelmed at the thought of working full time and caring for six children, Luella did not resent her husband for asking her to work. "We had to have more income," she said, "and so I decided, well, I guess I would go to work." The family wanted a new start. They had just purchased an eighty-acre farm. They did not have "enough money to buy a bigger farm," but with those eighty acres they became landowners for the first time and decided to raise a pure-bred Angus herd. This seemingly profitable business would allow them to sell bulls and heifers, and "be doing fine." Luella believed that if she could work in town as her husband cared for the growing Angus heard, which by then was up to fifty head,

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.



then the family could weather the economic crisis and reach their goal of making a living off the land.<sup>211</sup>

For Luella and Don, working for wages was not a long-term solution. They wanted to be farmers, not employees who worked in town but happened to live in the country. Even though she worked in town, Luella still took pride in working with the Angus herd. “It was a mutual project,” she said, “and we were very proud of them.” So, in 1958, on the third evening after Don attended two “farm meetings,” he approached Luella with a copy of a newspaper, the *NFO Reporter*. It was the official publication of a new farm organization, National Farmers Organization (NFO). He told her about what he learned at the meetings and asked her to look through the newspaper. When she finished reading about the NFO and their plan for collective bargaining in agriculture, Don asked her what she thought. Luella said, “It makes a lot of sense to me, except I don’t see how it will ever work... Farmers will never stick together.” Don agreed, but still thought they might join. What else could the couple do to secure a better future? Luella agreed. If prices improved, then Luella would no longer need to work in town. They could concentrate entirely on their farm and their family. Though membership dues were twenty-five dollars, Luella reasoned that even if the NFO was unable to achieve its goals and raise commodity prices, she and Don should at least give their money to “anyone who would try.”<sup>212</sup>

In the summer of 1955, the NFO began as a small, grassroots movement to combat low commodity prices and rising costs of production. In its formative years, the NFO acted

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

By the mid-1950s, wage-work among farmers was on the rise. According to historian R. Douglas Hurt, over 630,000 during this era took on second jobs to help pay farm expenses. R. Douglas Hurt, *Problems of Plenty*, 122.

<sup>212</sup> Luella Zmolek, interview, *Voices From the Land*.

primarily as a political lobbying group, but by the end of the 1950s, the NFO defined itself as an organization dedicated to collective bargaining in agriculture and securing higher prices for farmers. As historian Linda Tvrdy explained, “The NFO tried to convince farmers that collective bargaining, not individual begging, would give them the power to save themselves and their rural communities from the increasing corporatization and concentration of American agriculture.” Throughout the early 1960s, this played out in the formation of cooperatives, as well as holding actions wherein farm families withheld hogs, milk, and other products to influence market prices.<sup>213</sup>

Even before members used such tactics, many rural residents regarded the NFO with some suspicion, as a “left-leaning,” radical organization. On the other hand, most members, like Luella and Don Zmolek, considered themselves to be typical Midwestern farmers with traditional values and strong ties to the land. For them, the NFO was very much a “family” organization that required the efforts of women, as well as men. To date, however, scholars and historians have emphasized the economic and legal history of the NFO, ignoring the roles that women and families played as part of the organization’s overall mission. This reflects that, with the exception of a few national and state leaders, women did not typically

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<sup>213</sup> Linda A. Tvrdy, “The Free Market Revolt of the National Farmers Organization,” presented at the Agricultural History Society Conference, Cambridge, MA (June 2006), 1.

Linda Tvrdy is the daughter of Monica Tvrdy and the sister of Jackie Hilger, both of whom were interviewed for this study. Tvrdy played an important role in helping the author establish contact with five of the interview subjects. While the author is aware that Tvrdy’s background may influence her research, after careful consideration of the available sources, I have come to believe that Tvrdy is correct and accurate in her assessment of the NFO’s commitment to “romantic agrarianism.”

Exact membership numbers for the NFO are not available because during the period covered by this study, organizational leaders wished to keep these statistics confidential. They estimated that in any given county, the NFO needed just 25 to 30 percent of the farmers to join in order to successfully bargain with processors for higher prices, but preferred to keep membership numbers secret in order to heighten their bargaining power. According to historian Robert L. Tontz, in the mid-1950s the NFO reported a membership of 40,000 families. By the mid-1960s, Tontz reported that undocumented sources indicated NFO membership to be approximately 180,000 farm families. See Robert L. Tontz, “Memberships of General Farmers’ Organizations, United States, 1874-1960,” *Agricultural History* 38, no. 3 (1964), 145-146.

hold leadership positions or speak publicly on behalf of the organization. And while there were some activities specifically for women, there was no official separate women's auxiliary. Aside from a few films, as well as sporadic articles and photographs in the organization's periodical, the *NFO Reporter*, women left behind few printed materials or artifacts attesting to their involvement.

This chapter, therefore, explores the nature of women's involvement through ten oral histories of women who were active in the NFO in Iowa and Nebraska throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the era in which the NFO stirred the most controversy. In 2001, five Iowa women participated in oral history interviews as part of a greater grant-funded project through the Iowa Women's Archives and the Iowa State University Special Collections titled "Voices from the Land." This project sought to record the diverse experiences of rural Iowa women and included women from a variety of backgrounds. The Nebraska women featured in this study participated in a group interview which the author facilitated in Valparaiso, Nebraska in August 2007. In both cases, the women were decades removed from their initial involvement with the NFO, though several still lived on farms and a handful continued to market their goods through the NFO.

All of the women interviewed shared many common characteristics. Seven of the ten women began farming as young wives in the prosperous years of the 1940s and early 1950s. One began farming with her husband in 1957, one joined the NFO with her husband in the 1970s, and another, whose family had a long-time affiliation with the group, worked at an NFO office in the early 1980s. Overall, these women were young, in their twenties and thirties, and most had young children at home when they began their involvement with the NFO. Most were just starting out in farming, or had lived on their farms for ten years or less.

The oldest woman interviewed, Mabel Schweers of Adams County, Iowa, had lived on her farm for just fifteen years when she and her husband joined the NFO. They also appeared to come from relatively stable, though not necessarily prosperous farms. By the time they became members, five of the ten women lived on well-established family farms handed down from parents or grandparents. Two women lived on land that they and their husbands had recently purchased. Three others were tenants, though two of those three rented land from close family members and eventually inherited family-owned land. That these women shared youth and stability, or at least the expectation of stability, should not be surprising.

Sociologists Denton E. Morrison and Allan D. Steeves challenged the notion that “radical farmers” and “struggling farmers” were one in the same. In a 1967 article, they speculatively argued that members of the NFO were actually “in advantaged farm economic situations,” but expressed greater dissatisfaction with marketing practices and had higher income aspirations. Because of their high aspirations, they met with greater degrees of disappointment in times of economic hardship, and were therefore more likely to employ “drastic means,” or holding actions, to change the situation. As mothers of young children, the women interviewed shared an interest in creating a more stable, prosperous home environment that could only occur if commodity prices kept pace with the cost of farming.<sup>214</sup>

As a group, these women characterized themselves to be typical farm wives, as homemakers and mothers who worked in various ways to support their farm. Even if they worked for wages off the farm, which seven of the women did, they took pride in their roles

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<sup>214</sup> Mabel Schweers interview by Doris Malkmus, 18 September 2001, transcript, *Voices From the Land*; Donata DeBruyckere, *You Can Never Say We Didn't Try: The National Farmers Organization in Lyon County, Minnesota, 1962-1988* (Marshall, MN: Southwest State University, 1990) 7-8; Denton E. Morrison and Allan D. Steeves, “Deprivation, Discontent, and Social Movement Participation: Evidence on a Contemporary Farmers’ Movement, the NFO,” *Rural Sociology* 32, no.4 (1967): 414-434.

as farm women and were active in their communities as members of parent-teacher organizations, service groups, local churches, and clubs, including homemakers' clubs. All ten women graduated from high school, two had some college or professional training, one was a registered nurse, and three earned college degrees. From their general backgrounds, there is little to suggest that they differentiated themselves from their mainstream rural communities. Yet their stories offer a very different picture of rural life than that of women involved with homemakers' clubs, as offered in the previous chapter. As with women in homemakers' clubs, women in the NFO recalled forming deep, lasting friendships with other members. They also adapted their strategies over time to cope with changes in rural society. Unlike women in homemakers' clubs, though, women involved with the NFO shared a specific interest in agricultural marketing, as well as a vision for farm life based on marketing practices. Rather than viewing organization work through the gendered lens of "mutual but separate," as was done in homemakers' clubs, women in the NFO attended meetings with men, learned about marketing and collective bargaining, and emphasized mutual, cooperative roles for men and women. From administrative records and organizational publications, men clearly dominated the organization and members had clear ideas about acceptable roles for men and women. On the other hand, typically in private settings, gendered divisions of labor were somewhat skewed. Male leaders expected women to perform farm labor, work for wages in office settings, and support the NFO by attending meetings and performing administrative tasks.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> The women who participated in the "Voices From the Land" project include Luella Zmolek (interviewed by Doris Malkmus, 10 September 2001), Mabel Schweers (interviewed by Doris Malkmus, 18 September 2001), Martha Linn (interviewed by Doris Malkmus, 18 September 2001), Ilo Rhines (interviewed by Doris Malkmus, 26 October 2001), and Wilma Embree (interviewed by Doris Malkmus, 26 October 2001). The women interviewed by the author in Valparaiso, Nebraska include Arlene Fricke, Marcia Fick, Monica

A family's membership placed a variety of demands on women. For some, participation in the NFO meant working in supportive roles: as bookkeepers at checkpoints where farmers gathered their livestock for sale, as secretaries at an office, or as organizers of social functions. For others, participation meant running the farm and overseeing the family while their husbands pursued leadership positions. In fact, six of the women interviewed were either married to or related to men in leadership positions, and these relationships created significant personal demands that the other women did not experience.

Though some discussed their participation in holding actions, nowhere in these oral histories do the women mention violence or acts of sabotage carried out by NFO members. Some talked about actions against their own families or friends by those trying to undermine the NFO. In doing this, they portrayed the NFO's purpose as being misunderstood by the media, by the farming community, and by the general public. This may be partially due to the fact that women did not participate in clandestine endeavors to damage the farms of those who did not participate in holding actions. At the time, those who cut fences, placed sticks of dynamite in barn doors, or scattered tire-puncturing sickle-blade devices throughout fields of crops were rarely caught. Even if the women had knowledge of such happenings, they most likely practiced self-censorship during their interviews, desiring to protect family and friends who participated in illegal activities. Most of the women viewed the NFO as the victim of unfair media coverage and made concerted efforts to portray the organization in a positive light. For all of the women interviewed, membership in the NFO meant uniting behind agrarian ideals that upheld the family farm as the model of agricultural production. And this

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Tvrđy, Jackie Hilger (daughter of Monica Tvrđy), and Jean Wardman (interviewed 16 August 2007). The tapes and transcripts for women interviewed by the author are part of the National Farmers Organization records, 481, Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa.

was more than mere rhetoric. The women interviewed defined themselves, their family members, and fellow NFO members as model citizens. Fulfilling this vision required some to sacrifice relationships with family and friends, to surrender their own hopes and goals, and to give precious financial resources for the advancement of the organization.

The NFO has its roots in the period of economic readjustment following the Second World War. In 1955, Jay Loghry, a fifty-five-year-old feed salesman based in Corning, Iowa, observed that his customers, area farmers, were in the midst of an economic crisis. Reduced federal supports, coupled with drought conditions that decreased crop yields, led many Midwestern farmers to increase hog production in an attempt to offset their losses and increase their cash flow. Yet this proved disastrous for many families, as overproduction meant a rapid decline in hog prices. In April 1954, just before the end of the Korean War, the price of hogs reached a record high of \$26.40 per hundredweight. By March 1955, however, hog prices stood at \$17.25 per hundredweight. Prices then sank to \$12.20 in November, then to \$10.60 per hundredweight by mid-December. Once a farmer himself, Loghry lost his land in 1932 when he declared bankruptcy, then struggled for several years as a tenant. During the 1930s, Loghry did not translate his economic and personal struggles into agricultural activism. He did not turn to any particular organization for answers to his problems and had no connection to the Farm Holiday Movement, a militant holding action in response to low commodity prices in 1932 and 1933.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Don Muhm, *The NFO: A Farm Belt Rebel* (Rochester, MN: Lone Oak Press, 2000), 21-23.

During the Second World War, farm income increased 400 percent due to increased exports and federal price supports. Following the war, federal programs continued to extend loans to farmers that guaranteed 90 percent parity for staple crops including corn and wheat. In 1954, in an effort to reduce agricultural surpluses and federal spending, Congress passed legislation to introduce “flexible” price supports that guaranteed between 82.5 percent and 90 percent of parity on crops in 1955, and between 75 percent and 90 percent in 1956. In 1954, for example, farmers who planted corn received federal loans at \$1.62 per bushel,

In the late 1930s, Loghry took a job as a feed salesman for a major Midwestern company. He began traveling and talking with other farmers, and following the Second World War, he saw that his problems were not unique. The cost-price squeeze, or the failure of commodity prices to keep up with the rising cost of production, was a widespread problem. On September 5, 1955, Loghry was to speak to seven farmers and their children at a 4-H meeting about livestock feeding projects in Adair County, Iowa. In the end, though, Loughery talked to them about the economic crisis and how they might organize to resolve their problems. From there, he began holding small, public meetings that quickly grew as word spread in farming communities. By mid-September, when he held his fourth meeting in Corning, the *Omaha World Herald* reported that a crowd of more than 500 farmers came to hear Loughery's message. On 20 October 1955, with the help of former Iowa governor, Dan Turner, farmers from Missouri and Iowa met in Corning, Iowa as part of a "regional conference." There, they decided to officially organize as the National Farmers Organization. By the end of the 1950s, NFO leaders, with long-time president Oren Lee Staley at the head, formulated the clear goal of organizing farmers to bargain collectively for fair prices on their products. Though inspired by organized labor, members of the NFO had few real connections to urban workers. They identified themselves as farmers committed to preserving agriculture as a way of life, and the family farm as the ideal mode of production. By the 1970s and 1980s, many members of the NFO recognized they had not been successful in this mission,

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which guaranteed 90 percent parity. In 1955, loans dropped to 87 percent of parity and farmers who planted corn just received \$1.58 per bushel. That year, corn prices dropped to between \$1.10 to \$1.20 per bushel, well below the parity price of \$1.82. Likewise, wheat sold between \$1.90 and \$2.00 per bushel, considerably less than the \$2.50 required for parity. Reductions in price supports, then, made it difficult for farmers to yield significant profits, if at all. Hogs were not covered by these price supports, but many Midwestern farmers long considered hogs to be "mortgage savers," because livestock prices often held steady when corn prices declined. See: Seth S. King, "Drop In Farm Income Worries Grain Belt," *New York Times* (8 May 1955), E8; William M. Blairs, "Slump Continues for Farm Prices," *New York Times* (31 December 1955), 19.



though for several critical years in the 1950s and 1960s, the NFO at least offered farmers a means to resist “corporate agriculture.”<sup>217</sup>

Though a relatively young farm organization, compared to the American Farm Bureau Federation or the National Farmer’s Union, the history of the NFO is rife with controversy. In their evaluations of the group, social scientists have typically focused on the economic aspects of collective bargaining, and whether this idea of organizing farmers into a single bargaining unit could actually work in an industrial, free market economy. Journalists, politicians, and other observers have preferred to emphasize the NFO’s strategy of holding or destroying agricultural commodities through holding actions. These were occasionally accompanied by federal lawsuits against the NFO and acts of violence against farmers who did not participate in withholding their products from the market. Such militant activities of the NFO long provided sensational news stories for journalists, as well as scandalous fuel for opponents hoping to discredit the organization. Writing primarily from journalistic accounts, historians have likewise described the NFO as an organization for the militant farmer. At the

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<sup>217</sup> Muhm, 23-36.

Certainly, the NFO was not the first organization to emphasize collective bargaining or marketing commodities as a block to secure higher prices. In the twentieth century, the National Farmers’ Union (NFU) was of the main farm organizations to promote this idea, and leaders demanded that farmers be given the same consideration as skilled wage laborers in unions, with the ability to bargain for fair prices. Formed in 1902, it became the third largest farm organization in the United States, after the American Farm Bureau Federation and the Grange. Early members, who tended to be former Populists, established cooperatives primarily in the Midwest and on the Great Plains. By the mid-1950s, however, amidst an anti-communist fervor, the NFU encountered problems with leadership and efforts to draw the NFU away from the political left. Historian William C. Pratt wrote that by the mid-1950s, “the left in the countryside was purged or isolated. That the liberal mainstream in agriculture became more conservative reflects both its own move toward the center and the demise of the historic agrarian left.” For some members of the NFU, then, “experimenting with the NFO,” seemed to be a viable option. See: William C. Pratt, “The Farmer’s Union, McCarthyism, and the Demise of the Agrarian Left,” *Historian* 58, no. 2 (1996), 330, 341.

For general histories of the National Farmer’s Union, see: John A. Crampton, *The National Farmers’ Union: Ideology of a Pressure Group* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965); Michael W. Flamm, “The National Farmers’ Union and the Evolution of Agrarian Liberalism, 1936-1946,” *Agricultural History* 68, no. 3 (1994), 54-80; Roy Wortman, “Gender Issues in the National Farmers’ Union in the 1930s,” *Midwest Review* 15 (1993) 71-83; Bruce E. Field, *Harvest of Dissent: The National Farmers Union and the Early Cold War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998); and William Henry Kerr, *Farmers’ Union and Federation Advocate and Guide* (Topeka, KS: Crane and Company, Printers, 1919).

same time, however, scholars have also generally dismissed its effectiveness and lasting influence in the countryside. For example in 2002, historian R. Douglas Hurt, described the NFO as a small, politically ineffective, “radical” organization that attracted negative media attention and merely “dramatized... the economic plight of many farmers.”<sup>218</sup>

Yet, in 2001, as Luella Zmolek reflected on her life and participation with the NFO during an oral history interview, she painted a very different picture of this controversial organization. As farmers invested in more machinery, chemicals, and land, fostering a “get big or get out” mentality, Zmolek recognized that the small, family farm was quickly becoming something of the past. By working for better prices, the NFO promised a new economic model for farmers that enabled family farms to stay in business, that allowed family operations remain viable for future generations, and that stemmed the growth of corporate farms. As she looked at her own 80 acres, Zmolek explained that corporate farms not only endangered rural communities, but also the health and well-being of the entire nation. She said,

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<sup>218</sup> R. Douglas Hurt, *Problems of Plenty: The American Farmer in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee), 119, 143-144.

Typical of scholarly studies of the NFO include: J. Ronnie Davis and Neil A. Palomba, “The National Farmers Organization and the Prisoner’s Dilemma: A Game Theory Prediction,” *Social Science Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (1969), 742-748. Particularly telling of the perceived novelty of the NFO is the number of master’s theses and doctoral dissertations to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s. Coming from a variety of disciplines, these include: Truman David Wood, “The National Farmers’ Organization in Transition,” PhD dissertation, University of Iowa, 1961; and James Riddle Hundley, “A Test of Theories in Collective Behavior: The National Farmers Organization,” PhD dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1965. Other scholars have performed rhetoric analyses of NFO leaders and published materials, but again, these emphasize male leaders and typically male concerns, such as marketing. For examples, see David Carter, David Allen, “The National Farmers’ Organization and the Rhetoric of Institutionalization,” PhD dissertation, University of Iowa, 1976. Darrell Arden Disrud, “President Oren Lee Staley, 1958-1978: A Rhetorical Analysis of the National Farmer’s Organization,” MA Thesis, University of New Mexico, 1983; and Celia E. Shapland, “Protest in the Newspaper: A Case Study of the National Farmers Organization,” MS Thesis, Iowa State University, 1986.

For inside perspectives, see works by members and supporters, including: Charles Walters, *The Biggest Farm Story of the Decade: A Searching Look at Farm Trouble and the Search for an Equitable Answer* (Kansas City, MO: Halcyon House, 1968); Charles Walters, *Angry Testament* (Kansas City, MO: Halcyon House, 1969); Charles Walters, *Holding Action* (Kansas City, MO: Halcyon House, 1968); Willis Rowell, *Mad As Hell* (Corning, IA: Gauthier Publishing Company, 1984); and Willis Rowell, *The National Farmers Organization: A Complete History* (Ames: Sigler Printing and Publishing, 1993).

[The NFO] could see what was going to happen in the future. And everything we predicted has come true, and it's continuing today. It gets worse all the time. Like this farm, you know, it's all in corn this year. Next year it'll all be beans, and we know that's not the way it should be. You know, it should be rotated, you should have your own fertilizer instead of this commercial fertilizer and all the pesticides and so on. But there's nothing you can do about it anymore... We knew that this wasn't just affecting farmers. It's going to affect your small towns. It's affecting everybody, because, you know, what is in this food that we eat anymore?

With these words, Zmolek echoed a common attitude among NFO members who sought to maintain the family farm ideal, thereby upholding very traditional rural values, a fact that has escaped most scholarly analyses of the NFO.<sup>219</sup>

In her study of the organization, historian Linda Tvrdy recognized this shortcoming, and she actually identified members of the NFO as “authors of a social movement.” Tvrdy argued that the overall mission of the NFO defied the standard historical narrative wherein the loss of the family farm and rise of corporate farmers are viewed “as an almost inevitable by-product of free-market realities and technological progress.” Within this narrative, the NFO existed as an insignificant “interest group,” known only for its militancy and ability to make headlines throughout the course of the 1960s and 1970s. Tvrdy offered a new interpretation in which the NFO proposed an alternative, economically feasible vision based on the ideology of “romantic agrarianism.” Within this ideology, farmers cared “for their land, for each other, and for their nation.” Members set forth the rhetoric that independent farm families served as proud stewards of the land and resources that fed the nation. While independent families conserved soil and water, and cared for the welfare of their livestock, members of the NFO warned Americans that this was “something faceless corporations could and would not do.” This study of women’s roles within the NFO supports Tvrdy’s

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<sup>219</sup> Zmolek interview, *Voices From the Land*.

conclusions because in their oral histories, the women clearly stated that the NFO not only provided economic benefits and social opportunities, but also offered hope that they could “save” the family farm and agriculture as a way of life. As Zmolek explained, the family farm ideal is what “kept them going” in their work with the NFO.<sup>220</sup>

Throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, national NFO leaders emphasized the simplicity of their mission, to secure better prices through collective bargaining, and often promoted the organization as one oriented toward couples and families. In 1956, the NFO began publishing first a sporadic, then monthly organizational newspaper, *The NFO Reporter*, for members across the country. Running between four and eight pages, the full-size newspaper emphasized economic policy and articles geared toward educating farmers about collective bargaining. Overall, it provided very little information about the makeup of the general membership, and published only a few letters from members in each issue. Unlike the Farm Bureau, there were no articles about the contributions of men and women, and there was no separate section for articles of interest to women. When women appeared, they typically showed up in photographs from sausage feeds, annual celebrations designed to attract new members, and other major events where they played supportive roles. In September 1960, the *NFO Reporter* featured a photograph of nine women who served food at a recent sausage feed in Charles City, Iowa. The caption read, “This array of pretty young girls and ladies would be a welcome addition to the staff of any swank restaurant. This group helped make the sausage feed at Charles City, Iowa a tremendous success.”<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Tvrdy, 2-4.

<sup>221</sup> *The NFO Reporter* 4, no. 5 (September 1960), 3.

By the early 1960s, as the NFO gained more members, this changed somewhat, and women and families began to appear more often and in ways that emphasized their roles in the organization. In December 1960, the *NFO Reporter* featured a story about Mrs. Ralph Labertew, who spoke on the first evening of the national NFO convention. A farm wife from Udell, Iowa, Labertew avoided gender-specific rhetoric and spoke specifically about the purpose of the NFO. She said, “A farmer is his own boss, he can work as many hours as he chooses, he can produce as much as he likes. He can over produce, he can flood the market. But when he takes his product to the processor his independence has suddenly left for then he is told how much will be given him.” A typical example of the ways in which the NFO leaders viewed women and families can be seen in the issue from March 1961. First, the March 1961 issue of the *Reporter* featured a letter to the editor from Mrs. A. Van Vooren of Buchanan County, Iowa. She appealed to farm women to “back” their husbands and encourage them to become active NFO members. Van Vooren wrote, “Let’s put aside our pride, ladies, and tell the world we need a better living and income for our family... Let’s attend meetings with our husbands and be informed on the NFO program so we too can explain it and pass it along.” Likewise, male leaders began to emphasize the role of their families in building the NFO, often highlighting the importance of resourceful, hardworking wives. The same March 1961 issue contained the story of Don Henry, a county organizer from Nemaha County, Kansas. Though Henry did not mention his family in the article, a photograph of his wife and family chopping wood bore the caption,

Don Henry splits wood while Mom gathers up an armload and the four young’ns team up to haul in a wagon load. She, too, hopes NFO makes it possible for them to have a furnace. She hand-milks 30 cows while Don is out NFOing.

Men also used their roles as fathers to justify their participation in the NFO and to convince others to work for the organization. Again, in March 1961, county organizer Chuck Broderson of Herman, Nebraska was “peeved at the reluctance some of the other counties showed to get out and build an organization.” As NFO meetings conflicted with his son’s basketball games, Broderson urged men to get involved so they could share the burden of organizing. Broderson said, “It hurt me bad to have to tell him I couldn’t go and watch him... The poor kid had tears in his eyes when I said I couldn’t go.” At one meeting, he told the members he wanted to spend more time with his family and less time “NFOing – and if they’d pick up some of the load and watch television less, maybe I could.” Several volunteers stepped up after that, though at the time of publication, Broderson had yet to see his son play basketball.<sup>222</sup>

In March 1962, a story in the *NFO Reporter* titled “We Salute Our Wives,” most clearly expressed the popular rhetoric surrounding women’s roles in the organization. Though women served in offices, worked during holding actions, provided support at meetings and events, and participated in a variety of activities, this particular article emphasized women’s isolation and work performed on the farm. The writer told the story of one anonymous farm woman who managed three young children, 400 acres, seventy ewes, forty sows, six cows, three calves, “innumerable cats and a horse.” Not only did she face strenuous labor each day, but she was also “thirty-five miles from their doctor, a half mile from any neighbor, and nineteen miles from the nearest relative.” Two photographs of the anonymous farm woman accompanied the article, and showed the woman in deep snow and

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<sup>222</sup> “Letters to the NFO,” “Nemaha County at 231 Members,” and “NFO Rolling in Nebraska,” *The NFO Reporter* 5, no. 2 (March 1961), 2,3,6.

bitter cold (the caption mentioned it was just six degrees), feeding sheep and filling a hog feeder. Ultimately, the writer concluded,

The NFO salutes these thousands of women like her, who, by their courage and uncomplaining devotion, hard work, and self-sacrifice, make it possible for their menfolk to carry on the fight to get farmers in a position to price their products at the market place.

While this article shows that NFO members knew women were capable of running and managing the daily business of a farm, this should not imply that the NFO vision included women as typical, independent owners and operators of family farms. On the contrary, articles in the *NFO Reporter* illustrate that members generally upheld traditional ideals for men and women.<sup>223</sup>

Even though stories in the *NFO Reporter* spoke of men sacrificing time with their families and women working on the farm to support their husbands, it is also clear in several issues that this was not the ideal situation. Several articles and features sought to motivate members by promising that once they achieved higher commodity prices, NFO members could become full-time farmers and their wives could be full-time homemakers. For example, in February 1962, a two-page spread featuring photographs of members and quotes as to the benefits of membership, included the words of Mrs. Charles Salyer, the wife of an NFO organizer in Clinton County, Missouri. She was just as interested in raising the prices of hogs because higher prices would mean less manual labor for both herself and her husband. She said, “I’ll be glad when I can quit feeding hogs – when hogs bring in enough we can hire a man to feed them and my husband can spend more time at home.” Following these comments, the editor of the *NFO Reporter* added that Mrs. Salyer was not alone. He wrote,

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<sup>223</sup> “We Salute Our Wives,” *NFO Reporter* 6, no. 2 (March 1962), 3.

“Thousands of NFO wives will echo this sentiment – and thousands of them are feeding hogs and milking cows to make it come true that much sooner.” Throughout the 1960s, the *NFO Reporter* maintained this approach when dealing with women and families, usually portraying them as helpers and supporters of the overall NFO mission, and occasionally as officers, conference speakers, and active participants.<sup>224</sup>

During the mid-to-late 1960s, the NFO also produced a weekly, nation-wide television program titled *U.S. Farm Report*. The program featured a variety of speakers, economists, agronomists, politicians, activists, and others to discuss issues in agriculture. On several occasions, panelists on the *U.S. Farm Report* included couples, or farm women on their own, to discuss NFO policies, particularly how they affected families, children, and consumers. One 1965 television broadcast of a NFO panel discussion featured three farm women who spoke briefly on agricultural conditions. Among them was Mrs. Kenneth Johnson, a young farmer’s wife who worked with her husband to lobby the Iowa legislature. Because she was away from home so often, Johnson believed her children suffered for her work, though she believed this a worthy sacrifice, because she saw no future for her children in farming “unless things change.”<sup>225</sup>

When they appeared on the *U.S. Farm Report*, women typically upheld the farm wife as a partner in the farming enterprise and urged more women to be involved with the NFO, and with marketing commodities, on the basis they needed to secure a better life for their families. In July 1966, the *U.S. Farm Report* again featured a panel of three Iowa women, including Luella Berstler of Emmetsburg, Iowa. The mother of five sons and two daughters

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<sup>224</sup> *NFO Reporter* 6, no. 1 (February 1962), 4.

<sup>225</sup> Film: *The U.S. Farm Report: Iowa Farm Women* (1965), National Farmers’ Organization Records, MS 481, Special Collections, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa. Hereafter cited as NFO Records.



operated a diversified farm with her husband and was also an active member of the Methodist Church. Berstler compared women's work in the NFO to helping men in the fields. She said, "There isn't a wife who won't help her husband any day in the field when they're busy, and I think they can work just as hard on marketing and getting an adequate income, and creating new wealth that the nation deserves." Later that year, in November 1966, the *U.S. Farm Report* featured another panel of women from Tennessee. Mrs. William Stone, whose husband was the county NFO president, instructed women to use their social networks to build membership. She said, "A woman can't keep a secret, this is the time to talk, girls. We should take every opportunity to help. We can talk to our neighbors about NFO. We have home demonstration clubs, and if you drop in for a cup of coffee, talk about the NFO."<sup>226</sup>

Evident in all films featuring women was a sense of solidarity based on their roles as homemakers, and their identities as farm women. In 1967, a *U.S. Farm Report* titled, "Farm Wives' Concern for Agriculture," three NFO women from Colorado confronted Rose West, a consumer rights activist who organized a housewives' boycott of grocery stores in Denver. Though West expressed tremendous sympathy for farmers who did not receive good prices, farm women Bonnie Reineck and Pauline Hoffner only conveyed contempt for urban housewives. Because urban women preferred to shop at major chain stores, Hoffner stated, "I think the housewife is a little bit lazy." She explained that urban women misplaced their priorities and blamed farmers for high food prices. Hoffner said,

And yet she thinks she's saving all this time by shopping at the big chain stores. She doesn't stop to think about this, that maybe she can go to the beauty shop, she can

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<sup>226</sup> Film: *The U.S. Farm Report: Farm Wives' View of Farming* (27 July 1966), NFO Records; Film: *The U.S. Farm Report: Ladies Talk NFO* (10 November 1966), NFO Records.

take time out to go to the beauty shop, she takes time for lots of things. But when she goes to the supermarket she thinks she's saving time, and I don't believe she does. And not only that, when she gets to the cash register and she looks at her bill and my what a food bill. But what does she have in her cart? It's not all food."

Instead, women filled their carts with expensive hairspray, shoe polish, toothpaste, and other products, and then mistakenly believed they were paying more for food products. Reineck supported this perspective and said that urban women took their luxuries for granted. She quipped, "The housewives don't complain about the car they buy, or the fur coats they buy, or some extravagant thing. Yet they complain about the food [prices]." Reineck and Hoffner explained to West that farmers could not "give away" their commodities, and they blamed rural depopulation on urban consumers who demanded less expensive food.<sup>227</sup>

The greatest fear expressed by both Reineck and Hoffner, which was typical of many women in the NFO, was that they would not pass the family farm on to their children. Hoffner encouraged her children to receive an education and look for work in town. Finding work and succeeding in an urban setting was not the problem, primarily because those raised on farms performed well at wage labor. When asked by the host where displaced farmers could go, Hoffner said,

Let's not get in our head that the farmers are dumb, because they're not. And he's going to knock the city man off of his job... He's going to be more ambitious. He's used to long hours and working hard and he's not going to worry about his coffee break because he doesn't get one on the farm. And I don't know of any farmers who have gone to town and gotten a job, who really wanted a job of some kind. And they're not really particular about what kind of job at first, because once they get started they move up the line pretty fast. They find out that a farmer is just as smart as a city man.

On the other hand, this was not ideal. Hoffner wanted nothing more than for one of her children to inherit the farm, though this hardly seemed feasible. She said, "The way things

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<sup>227</sup> Film: U.S. Farm Report: Farm Wives' Concern for Agriculture (1967), NFO Records.

are going I'm afraid these children won't have a chance on the farm. They're being squeezed out!"<sup>228</sup>

In 1984, Willis Rowell, a long-time NFO member from Edgewood, Iowa, and the brother of Ilo Rhines, one of the women interviewed in this study, wrote one of the best accounts of women's participation in the NFO in his memoir, *Mad As Hell*. Rowell, who joined the NFO in 1955, worked as a county organizer, staff worker, and special assistant to three NFO presidents: Oren Lee Staley (1955-1979), DeVon Woodland (1979-1991), and Steven Holloran (1991-1995). In *Mad As Hell*, Rowell dedicated the volume to his wife and daughter and he included a mid-1970s photograph of women at an NFO meeting with the caption, "NFO Ladies... Important cog in the organization." He also devoted a two-page chapter to the "very important part wives played in the effort." Though he did not cite specific examples or provide names of individual female leaders, Rowell described women as "the front-line troops when the home county had a sausage feed or other promotional affairs." They did the "planning, the cooking, and the serving." They were also "a force to be reckoned with during holding actions," as they dumped milk, churned butter to preserve the cream, and maintained the NFO's Minuteman system, or telephone tree. Rowell stated that women took an active part in demonstrations, became public speakers, and promoted collective bargaining on radio call-in shows. They also endured days and weeks alone on the farm as their husbands worked for the NFO, and Rowell recalled, "Perhaps our wives' greatest contribution was keeping the bed warm and friendly no matter what time we organizers got home for a night or a weekend." In his writing, Rowell clearly reflected the

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

experiences shared by the women in their oral histories, as he acknowledged the material and emotional cost of NFO membership.<sup>229</sup>

Sources such as *The NFO Reporter*, the *U.S. Farm Report*, writings by members, and other archival sources reveal that women and families played some role in the NFO, but they do not reveal the extent of women's participation, or whether they actually supported their husbands in fulfilling the vision of the organization. Oral histories, on the other hand, can tell more about the personal aspects of membership and the ways in which women came to believe in the NFO. Certainly, the women interviewed in this study show only the side of those women who were dedicated to the organization, who believed in its mission, and who endured many difficult years in the process. For some, they faced significant hardships in their marriages and personal lives as a result of their membership in the NFO, and it is reasonable to assume that there were many women who would not reflect as easily or as positively, or with as much passion, as did the women in this study. The ten oral histories used in this study provide only a small sample, but given this is the first scholarly analysis of women in the NFO, the ten oral histories at least provide a starting point for further inquiry and debate into the issues related to women's activism and their roles in the NFO.

One of the most striking similarities between all of the women interviewed in this study, is that even before their families were involved with the NFO, they shared a confidence and general agreement as to the value of not just their own work, but in women's overall contributions to farming. Mabel Schweers, who was born in March 1918 on a 400-acre farm in Adams County, Iowa, was unusual in her educational experience, but held fairly typical views shared by the women interviewed in this study. Graduating from high school in

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<sup>229</sup> Muhm, 56-57; Willis Rowell, *Mad As Hell* 78-79.

a class of seventy-five, she was one of two students to go on to college, and in 1939, Schweers graduated from Iowa State College in Ames, Iowa with a degree in home economics. Though she had opportunities to work for corporations in urban settings, she had grown up on a farm and wanted to return to the countryside. As her graduation from Iowa State drew near, she “made a novena to the Blessed Mother, and I asked her to get me a job in a place where there were some young farmers, because I always wanted to marry a farmer.”<sup>230</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Schweers accepted an offer to teach high school home economics in the small town of Arcadia, Iowa. There were plenty of farmers in the area, but only one who fit Schweers’ other criteria: he had to be taller than her and he had to be a Catholic. In 1941, she married Art Schweers, whose “stern German ways were very beneficial for being the head of the family, because he didn’t do anything that was foolish.” The couple spent the next forty-three years working and raising their eleven children on a 240-acre farm in Adams County, Iowa. They initially rented the land from Mabel’s uncle, but then purchased it when the uncle died. Schweers described their situation as fairly stable, as she earned cash income though the sale of eggs, provided much of the family’s food through gardening and canning, and sewed most of the family’s clothing. She said,

As far as the cost of raising our family, we had a dairy farm, we had milk, we had our vegetables, we had our own meat... Most of the time, we got along fine, except maybe in a dry year when the crops didn’t grow well, but we always had livestock and we always had milk to sell. So we always had a continuous income. We didn’t have to wait for seasonal things.

Mabel and Art even promised each of their eleven children that they would pay for one year of college. So for the Schweers, the NFO did not necessarily offer increased prosperity, but it

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<sup>230</sup> Schweers interview, *Voices From the Land*.

did offer protection from falling prices that threatened their economic stability. And working for that stability was just as much a concern for Schweers as it was for her husband. She said, “On the farm, the women had just as big a part to play as the men. My daughters milked just like my sons did. They loaded bales. They could do anything. They could drive the tractor. They could to anything. There was no division there at all.” As with all of the women interviewed for this study, Schweers usually deferred to her husband’s judgment in decisions for the farm and family, but still described herself as a “feminist,” who believed that women played essential roles on the farm and in society.<sup>231</sup>

In both Nebraska and Iowa, most of the women recalled that they first heard about the NFO through friends and family. Like Luella Zmolek, several women first heard about the NFO from their husbands, who typically sought their wives’ approval before joining. In some cases, though, the women approved because they trusted their husbands to make good choices for the farm. From 1953 until 1974, Jean Wardman operated a dairy farm with her husband Don and their four children in Seward County, Nebraska. In the late 1950s, an organizer stopped by their house and spoke with Don. Jean knew it would be difficult for them to be active members because of the demands of the dairy operation, but she believed that the collective bargaining would prove beneficial. She said, “I hadn’t visited with the fellow, but [Don] had and had been impressed. So I went along with his feelings on it.” Similarly, Martha Linn, who grew up in the town of Villisca, Iowa, first lived on a farm when she married her husband, Darwin, in 1957. The couple started out on rented land near Villisca, and Linn clearly recalled the day, shortly after they were married, when Darwin came through the back door of their home, energized from having attended a local NFO

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

meeting. He said, ““Oh Marta, we have this wonderful thing that is going to help us with this farming problem.” Having grown up in town, Linn had little knowledge of farming or marketing, but she knew “we didn’t have a lot of money,” and she trusted her husband’s judgment.<sup>232</sup>

Others first heard about the NFO from friends and family who talked to the women and their husbands as a couple. In the early 1960s, Monica Tvrdy and her husband, Edwin, were preparing to move to a farm near Ashland, Nebraska. As they fixed up their farm house, a good friend continuously dropped in to talk about the NFO. The friend especially wanted to recruit Edwin to be a leader and promised him, “If you get involved you’ll be going places.” Tvrdy recalled that she and Edwin both liked the ideas behind the NFO, but joked that their real motivation was to satisfy their friend. She said, “he [the friend] was constantly there talking to us about NFO, and we weren’t getting anything done. Finally we just decided to sign [the contract] and get him out of the house so we could get some work done, and from then on we were involved.” Likewise, Ilo Rhines, who began farming in 1950 with her husband Don, lived on his family’s farm near Edgewood, Iowa. One summer afternoon in 1958, Ilo’s brother, Willis Rowell, stopped by to talk with Ilo and Don. Rhines recalled that it was like any other visit, as they rested and discussed family news. As they “sat down on the grass alongside the barn,” Rowell brought up “this new organization that he was excited

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<sup>232</sup> Martha Linn interview with Doris Malkmus, 10 September 2001, transcript, Voices From the Land; Jean Wardman, interview by author, 16 August 2007, National Farmers Organization records, MS 481, Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa.

about.” Rhines was initially “skeptical about it,” but it wasn’t long before she and Don were “willing workers” for the NFO.<sup>233</sup>

Even into the 1970s, recruitment continued to depend on neighbors and local organizers. In the early 1970s, Marcia Fick began farming with her husband, Merlin, in Hamilton County, Nebraska, and they were approached by Edwin Tvrdy and the same talkative friend who had convinced the Tvritys to join. Initially, like many of the women, Fick was unsure about joining. She said, “I wasn’t sold on it because I had head the radical end of it. But ... soon we were in there. And we got involved, because we raised hogs, we got involved in the collection points,” referring locations where NFO members would gather their livestock to sell collectively. As she attended meetings and national conventions, Fick “got very sold on the idea,” and her husband eventually became the Nebraska state treasurer. For them, collective bargaining was very appealing because it took much of the guesswork out of agriculture and deciding when to sell. Fick explained, “Merlin really enjoyed the grain marketing, for him it was a relief because he didn’t have to watch the markets. The NFO did that for him. It took some of the stress off.”<sup>234</sup>

For each of the women interviewed, the decision to join the NFO appeared, at least to some degree, to be a mutual decision with their husbands. For Ilo Rhines, mutual decision-making was a normal part of her married life. As the family bookkeeper, or “the watchdog on the money,” Rhines related several humorous stories about her husband purchasing farm equipment at auctions, then asking friends to accompany him home because “he was afraid

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<sup>233</sup> Monica Tvrdy, interview by author, 16 August 2007, National Farmers Organization records, MS 481, Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa; Ilo Rhines, interview by Doris Malkmus, 26 October 2001, transcript, *Voices From the Land*.

<sup>234</sup> Marcia Fick, interview by author, 16 August 2007, National Farmers Organization records, MS 481, Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa.



of what I was going to say.” Rhines’ husband, Don, also consented to buying an automatic washing machine less than a week after she broke her wrist and was unable to wash their sons’ diapers using the an old ringer washing machine. When it came to the NFO, Rhines found that “the women were just about as active with some of the decision making and whether they [the family] were joining or not.” Certainly, not all women enjoyed such deference from their husbands, but Luella Zmolek knew of a few men whose wives were not involved in the NFO. Zmolek explained that for men to take on leadership responsibilities and become active in the organization, they absolutely needed their wives’ support. She said, “[The men] had to do so much volunteer work and all that sort of thing and be gone so much, that if the wife wasn’t involved also, then, you know, it would not work [laughing].”<sup>235</sup>

This evidence of mutual decision-making could be seen as a product of oral histories from women who were committed to the organization, though there is also evidence to suggest that many men and women decided as a couple whether to become active members. In *Mad As Hell*, Willis Rowell praised the women who supported their husbands in the NFO, but also found that “wives could also be a hindrance.” As an organizer during the late 1950s and early 1960s, Rowell encountered men who refused to join because their wives objected. In describing one instance, he wrote,

I was on the porch one evening visiting with a prospect when his wife opened the door and demanded that her husband come in immediately. He and I both knew that she meant just what she said. He went in the house and I went home.

Months later, Rowell met the man in town, where the man apologized for what happened that night. He explained that the family had fallen on hard times and his wife was afraid he might spend their last \$25 on NFO dues. Rowell concluded, “Who could blame her for feeling the

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<sup>235</sup> Rhines interview, *Voices From the Land*; Zmolek interview, *Voices From the Land*.

way she did? Times were tough on the farm.” Even in the 1980s, when the NFO no longer used holding actions and shed its controversial image, husbands and wives continued to share their decisions to join. In the early 1980s, Jackie Hilger, the daughter of Monica and Edwin Tvrdy, worked at the NFO office in David City, Nebraska. She often spoke with men over the phone who were ready to sign up, but wanted to think it over. She said, “We’d go through the whole thing and then he’d call back and say ‘We can’t do it.’ His wife didn’t go for it.”<sup>236</sup>

Once they made the decision to join, maintaining membership and participating in activities continued to be a mutual venture. All of the women interviewed spoke of their activities in terms of working with other couples. In 1956, Arlene Fricke settled with her husband on a diversified farm near David City, Nebraska. For several years, when her husband served as district president while she served as district secretary, they often traveled with other couples to county, state, and national events. Such camaraderie enabled women and their husbands to create life-long friendships with other couples, and Fricke concluded, “You made lots of good friends through NFO, and the women were just as interested as the men.”<sup>237</sup>

Rather than feeling out of place at meetings several women described local NFO meetings as opportunities for couples, friends, and neighbors to meet and discuss “the farm problem.” Typically, women engaged in the gender specific task of preparing and serving food during the social period of the meeting. For Ilo Rhines, one of her most vivid memories of participating in the NFO involved an embarrassing moment involving her contribution to a mid-day meal. One fall, as she rushed out of the house to go to an NFO meeting, she grabbed

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<sup>236</sup> Rowell, 79; Jackie Hilger, interview by author, 16 August 2007, National Farmers Organization records, MS 481, Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa.

<sup>237</sup> Arlene Fricke, interview by author, 16 August 2007, National Farmers Organization records, MS 481, Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa.

a tea towel from a drawer and laid it over the food she had prepared. As the women were busy arranging the food, Rhines looked up to see another woman horrified at the sight of two tiny mouse droppings on top of Rhines' tea towel. She said, "It was really hard for me to admit that was my box of food, I guess it was one of my most embarrassing moments." For these women, then, providing food allowed them to demonstrate their domestic skills, at the cost of some humiliation if they did not maintain specific standards.<sup>238</sup>

For Luella Zmolek, women in her local NFO group also added to the meetings by providing refreshments and creating a family-friendly atmosphere, though such roles did not isolate her from participating in the greater organization. Initially, when she and Don joined, "there weren't too many farm women who would come." As a result, Zmolek became part of a "core" group that "always attended the meetings." Once membership increased, however, more and more women became involved and Zmolek noted that the NFO expanded her sense of community well beyond her local neighborhood. She said that initially, before they became active she and Don were both "very naïve." Within a short time, however, NFO members formed deep friendships and "you'd almost feel closer than you did to your brothers and sisters because they understood what we were doing, and we just understood each other so much." She met people beyond her neighborhood, her church, and her community, and learned about the experiences of those across the country, well beyond her "own little world."<sup>239</sup>

This proved true whether the women were new to farming or seasoned farm wives. Martha Linn, who had never lived on a farm prior to her marriage, found great support and

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<sup>238</sup> Rhines interview, *Voices From the Land*.

<sup>239</sup> Zmolek interview, *Voices From the Land*.

encouragement from those she met in the NFO. Linn said, “That was probably one of the nicest things about belonging to the NFO, you got to meet all the people who were sharing the same philosophy and way of thinking about farming as you were.” On the other hand, Mabel Schweers, who had lived on her farm fifteen years before joining the NFO, believed men and women worked well together as couples at NFO meetings. Schweers and her husband, Art, first heard about the NFO through articles in the local newspaper in the mid-1950s and decided to join. Mabel said, “We could see right away that there might be some good that came from this, so we followed it. I don’t think Art was informed too much about their original meetings, but as soon as it became quite popular and public, well, right away he became interested in joining.” Schweers described the NFO as a “community of farmers,” and stated that although men “were the ones that made [the NFO] work,” wives usually attended meetings and provided input. She said, “If [women] had something they wanted to say, they would. I mean, we were not shy at all. We said what we thought.”<sup>240</sup>

In many ways, the women interviewed broadly defined participation in the NFO, and stated that they were “doing their part,” when performing farm chores and managing the family to free their husbands for organizational work. When asked whether the NFO was strictly a “man’s organization,” Ilo Rhines explained that participating in the NFO required the efforts of an entire family. She said,

Well, I think other than the men’s signing the contract, it was their name on it, you know [laughing] ... I don’t think that it was necessarily a man’s organization, in our association, in our county, the women always came to the meeting... And you know, when the men were out there going door to door somebody was back home taking care of the pigs that were farrowing or the chickens that they were raising or the, doing the milk and if [the man] left to go two or three counties away to one of their promotions they would leave before the milking was done and so it was the women

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<sup>240</sup> Linn interview, *Voices From the Land*; Schweers interview, *Voices From the Land*.

and the kids that were back home doing the work. So as far as I'm concerned it was a whole family type project.

For women in the NFO, then, participation consisted of more than attending meetings. They clearly equated performing daily farm chores with the NFO, and found such responsibilities, or at least working on a farm with an absent husband, to be somewhat out of the ordinary.<sup>241</sup>

Though few of the women interviewed sought leadership positions, they all attended meetings regularly, usually with their husbands, and they looked forward to hearing speakers, learning about NFO activities, discussing agricultural issues, and developing marketing strategies. All of the women mentioned a sense of camaraderie with other women and the importance of forming friendships, but none of the women interviewed expressed any desire to organize separately as women. Women's auxiliaries appeared sporadically and organized according to local preferences, rather than according to models established and handed down by state or national leaders. For example, in March 1957, the *NFO Reporter* featured a photograph of approximately 100 women of Johnson County, Missouri. They met in Warrensburg, the county seat, to form the Johnson County NFO Ladies' Auxiliary. They elected officers and adopted several resolutions. Their overall purpose was to "support the NFO program and to give social assistance at the NFO meetings." Such reports were

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<sup>241</sup> Rhines interview, *Voices From the Land*.

Though the NFO expected women to play a role in the organization, the exact roles of children were less clear. During the 1950s and 1960s, photographs of children regularly appeared in the *NFO Reporter*, as they participated in parades and family events, such as ice cream socials and sausage feeds. Occasionally, photographs of children appeared as human-interest features, with quips about the future of the organization. For example, in November 1967, the *NFO Reporter* featured a portrait of Jerome Humliech, the one-year-old son of Bernard A. Humliech of Prague, Nebraska, wearing a tiny NFO t-shirt. Overall, though it appears that children were to be under the watchful guise of women or babysitters. In their oral histories, women often stated that in order to attend meetings they needed a babysitter because children were too distracting. Luella Zmolek, Arlene Fricke, and Martha Linn mentioned that they often left older children to watch the younger ones. Monica Tvrdy stated directly that she could not attend meetings when she and her husband first became involved because her children were too young, the oldest being just four years old at the time when she and Edwin became active. Marcia Fick, however, did mention that her children would often go to the check points when they sold hogs to socialize and eat doughnuts. See: *The NFO Reporter* 11, no. 11 (November 1967), 16; Zmolek, oral history; Fricke, oral history; Linn, oral history; Tvrdy, oral history; Fick, oral history.

extremely rare in *Reporter*, however, and in general, it did not appear that women organized separate activities on a large scale.<sup>242</sup>

If women did organize, news of their activities appeared in the *Reporter* only if they sponsored a major event. In June 1962, one article in the *Reporter* described the fifth annual bus tour taken by fifty “northern Iowa ladies,” most of whom were members of the Webster County, Iowa NFO auxiliary. In previous years, they had seen the Amana Colonies, Boys Town, outside of Omaha, Nebraska, and Sioux City, Iowa, but in 1962 the women spent one day driving through Minnesota, touring Minneapolis and St. Paul. They initially planned to visit the Ford Motor Company, but when they arrived at the plant, they found the workers to be on strike. Instead, they went to the zoo and then went shopping. Again, however, this was one of the first articles since 1957 to even mention an NFO ladies auxiliary. The next article to even mention women organizing separately did not appear in the *Reporter* until January 1963, when the women of Macoupin County, Illinois decided to hold their own meetings after the regular county meetings. This raises the question as to whether women’s auxiliaries were common but rarely discussed, or whether they were in fact uncommon. Much of the evidence alludes to the idea that the auxiliaries were actually uncommon, as the article about the bus tour described how women from five neighboring counties, all without auxiliaries, joined the Webster County women in their tour. Furthermore, none of the women interviewed for this study ever described participating in any type of women’s organization.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> *The NFO Reporter* 2, no. 4 (May 1957), 5.

<sup>243</sup> “NFO Ladies On Bus Tour,” *NFO Reporter* 6, no. 5 (June 1962), 3; “Auxiliary is Formed,” *NFO Reporter* 6, no. 11 (January 1963), 3.

The women interviewed in Nebraska believed a separate women's auxiliary to be unnecessary. Arlene Fricke explained that meetings typically began with discussions about business, followed by a social hour. In this way, the NFO, "was a family thing, we all worked for the same purpose together. The women never wanted to have their own meetings."

Monica Tvrđy agreed and said,

There was no reason to have a separate group... I don't know what we'd have done as a separate women's group. The idea was collective bargaining and so what else could we do? It was always the family that was involved... We were so busy with the one organization, we didn't need an additional group to socialize.

These comments reflected the fact that the women interviewed had a concentrated interest in marketing and economic policy. When asked why there was no separate women's group,

Marcia Fick, who began farming with her husband, Merlin, in the early 1970s, clearly articulated her concerns for marketing and her preference for membership in the NFO.

During the late 1970s, Fick heard about another organization specifically for farm women called Women Involved in Farm Economics (WIFE), and she attended a few organizational meetings. Although members of WIFE shared many of the same concerns as the members of the NFO, the new organization did not meet Fick's needs and interests.

She said,

One of the reasons I didn't get really involved with WIFE was because I felt like I could do the same thing in NFO. WIFE was more involved on the political level, so if I wanted to do something that way, I would have done more to stay involved. But what I wanted to accomplish could be done with the NFO. Politics is too frustrating.

Fick believed that she could bring about greater change for her family and other farmers by working to alter marketing practices with the NFO, as opposed to lobbying politicians to change state and federal policies with WIFE.<sup>244</sup>

Monica Tvrđy further described her interest in agricultural marketing and collective bargaining by stating that farmers and their families knew what was best not just for the family farm, but for all consumers. Tvrđy added,

On the family farm people take pride in what they do, they do it right, and have good quality. When you get to corporations, they're punching a clock, they could care less what's going to happen out of that. And you're not going to have the quality or anything.

Tvrđy also compared the NFO with other commodity-specific organizations, such as the Porkettes or the Cowbells, in which women were typically responsible for building relationships with urban consumers. While she appreciated the efforts of commodity-specific organizations in promoting agriculture to the general public, she did not believe promoting specific cuts of meat or certain products would result in higher commodity prices. Tvrđy believed that farmers did not “have to promote food, really, because people are going to eat.” Organizations could emphasize the healthful benefits of milk or a specific cut of meat, unless farmers demanded a fair price, “it won't make a whole lot of difference. She believed that the NFO offered a more practical solution to the problem of unstable commodity prices by allowing farmers to set their own standards, as opposed to asking that processors and consumers establish acceptable prices.<sup>245</sup>

All of the women interviewed possessed a profound commitment to the mission of the NFO to organize farmers and promote collective bargaining. This commitment stemmed

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<sup>244</sup> Fricke interview with author, NFO records; Tvrđy interview with author, NFO records; Fick interview with author, NFO records.

<sup>245</sup> Tvrđy interview with author, NFO records.



not from radical political backgrounds, or solidarity with urban workers, but rather the belief that farmers needed to organize in order to compete in a modern marketplace. When asked to compare the NFO with a labor union, Luella Zmolek said she had some sympathy for workers, but believed that organizing farm families had greater obstacles in organizing. She said, “I don’t think we ever thought of ourselves in comparing it to a labor union because labor unions, they just were out to get a higher wage. But with us it was so much bigger than that, because yes, you had to come together and form an organization, but then you would have all these different commodities and so on.” Zmolek understood the complexity of organizing independent families with diverse interests, and in many ways the women in this study set farmers apart from urban wage earners. They often elevated the farmers’ status, drawing on the notion that because they produced the nation’s food, farmers were more than replaceable workers in a factory. Farmers had more than just a skill or a trade. They were providers, working with the land and living things to provide sustenance to the masses.<sup>246</sup>

The women interviewed shared the belief that farmers had the right to set prices on the products they produced. Even if they were initially skeptical as to whether the NFO’s plan could work, most women found the ideas behind the NFO easy to understand and plausible. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the front page of the *NFO Reporter* featured a column by President Oren Lee Staley, where he usually wrote in very spirited terms as to the benefits of organization. In his first column in September 1956, Staley clearly defined the nature of the NFO’s struggle, writing, “This is the last battle for agriculture.” He warned members that if they lost this “battle,” current trends would lead to “corporation farms and ghost towns in the agricultural areas of America.” In addition to these grim predictions and

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<sup>246</sup> Zmolek, interview, *Voices From the Land*.

militant calls to action, however, Staley offered hope and asked farmers to recognize their own importance in the American economy. He wrote,

The farmers of America are the only producers in our economy that have nothing to say about the price we receive for our products. We see everything wholesale and buy everything retail and pay the freight both ways. We produce the most essential commodity in America because every American eats three meals a day.

Staley then encouraged members to continue their efforts in organizing for the NFO and create “the most powerful economic force in America.” Such rhetoric was not lost on the women interviewed for this study, and they clearly understood and internalized the messages of the national organization. In each of the interviews, when asked to describe why they believed in the NFO, the women expressed similar ideas to those of Staley and other national leaders. As Monica Tvrdy explained, because farmers had products to sell, they also had the right to set the price. She said, “I always felt like it is so simple. If you’re willing to take [a commodity] to town and sell it for whatever they’ll give you, why would they give you any more than they have to? You wouldn’t go to a store and say, ‘Well, this is worth more, I’ll pay you more.’ Its no different.”<sup>247</sup>

NFO members did not expect dramatic changes in their standard of living, nor did they believe they would gain great material wealth. Instead, they envisioned a system of collective bargaining that allowed farm families to set prices, meet the cost of production, and provide a comfortable, though modest, standard of living for all farm families. In light of rising food prices, Ilo Rhines said simply, “We weren’t asking for the sky, we just wanted our fair share of the profit.” In doing this, NFO members believed they could bring the farmer into the modern marketplace on their own terms. Martha Linn described the NFO

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<sup>247</sup> Oren Lee Staley, “The President’s Message...” *The NFO Reporter* 1, no. 1 (September 1956), 1; Tvrdy interview with author, NFO records.

“philosophy,” as one that valued cooperation over competition. She said, “I think the NFO is trying to show a whole philosophy of learning to work together with your neighbor all the time... It was to, you know, put your crop together and put your livestock together so you had some clout at the marketplace. Everybody else did it, there was no reason why the farmer couldn’t learn to do it too.”<sup>248</sup>

As they came to see collective bargaining as the answer to unstable commodity prices, several of the women expressed a new sense of empowerment. When she and her husband began running collection points, where several farmers would pool their hogs together before taking them to the packing plants, Mabel Schweers found they developed an entirely new set of skills. Within a county, farmers would first bargain with the processors and decide on a price, then meet at one location to load their hogs on to one semi-trailer. Before they delivered the hogs to the processing plant, however, the farmers learned to measure the back fat, determine the grade of the meat, and determine the weight of individual hogs. In describing the benefits, Schweers said,

The scales were one of the biggest advantages because we knew how much they weighed before they went to the packing plant. They couldn’t cheat us on weight, so that was a big advantage. We were feeling like we were getting in command. We could set some prices ourselves instead of having somebody else say well, how much you gonna give me? It was a good feeling.

In addition to working at checkpoints, several of the women also served as secretaries and writers for newsletters, where they gained valuable new skills. When she began attending NFO meetings with her husband, Arlene Fricke looked to other women for leadership. She said of one woman, “She was the best district secretary you could ever have. She was just so thorough and so good, I thought, ‘There’s no one who could ever do as good as her.’” A few

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<sup>248</sup> Rhines interview, *Voices From the Land*; Linn interview, *Voices From the Land*.

years later, however, when the office was vacant, she was asked to step in. She took notes at all of the meetings and afterwards sent out handwritten copies. Frickie recalled that she found the job demanding, especially with young children at home, but she simply made time for the work throughout the day and enjoyed the challenge.<sup>249</sup>

For other women, working with the NFO could even lead to paid employment. Wilma Embree, who was born in 1922, grew up on a farm in Cass County, Iowa. In 1940, she graduated from high school and attended Red Oak Junior College. She had hoped to marry her high school sweetheart, Stanley Embree, but in 1941 he enlisted in the Marines and the couple decided to postpone marriage until he returned from the service. In the meantime, Wilma taught fifth and sixth graders first in a country school near Stanton, Iowa, then at Wales-Lincoln, a consolidated school near Red Oak. She and Stanley finally married in October 1945, once he returned from overseas. The first few years of their marriage, the couple rented a 240-acre farm before moving to a 160-acre farm belonging to Wilma's grandparents in Adams County, Iowa. There they raised their two children and remained on that farm until 1987.<sup>250</sup>

In the mid-1950s, when commodity prices dropped, Embree returned to teaching to secure a better income, and she and Stanley decided to join the NFO. By the early 1960s, Embree and several other women, including Mabel Schweers, decided to start a countywide newsletter. They included local news, as well as information from the *NFO Reporter*, and the women took responsibility for printing and mailing the newsletters to members. Ultimately, for Embree, her activities with the NFO led to a full-time job at the national office doing

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<sup>249</sup> Schweers interview, *Voices From the Land*; Fricke interview with author, NFO records

<sup>250</sup> Wilma Embree interview by Doris Malkmus, 26 October 2001, transcript, *Voices From the Land*.

secretarial work. In 1968, as her children decided to go to college, Embree decided that working at the NFO office wouldn't be as "demanding as school." Working from eight to four, she managed new memberships, handled membership dues, and started files on new members. In general, she viewed her work with the NFO as one more thing she could do to help her husband. Embree equated her work with farm work when she said, "We lived in a farming community, and everybody helped their husbands. Some of them worked in fields and chored and did those things, and that was a way to help them maybe farm more land even. To expand and get better machinery in that way."<sup>251</sup>

Not all work provided such positive experiences, however, and for Embree, office work could be "mundane." It provided more income than personal fulfillment, and like many women, wage work took her away from responsibilities at home. In the early 1980s, Monica Tvrđy's husband, Edwin, told her she needed to work at the NFO office in David City, Nebraska. They were short staffed and needed part-time help. Though she saw several benefits to working at the office, it was not an ideal situation and it required that she learn difficult skills, such as working with office equipment and computers. Tvrđy still had two children at home and "resented it a lot," but found some benefit in that it enabled her to learn more about the NFO. She said,

That was one good thing about coming to work at the office because I was more in tune with what was going on. Ed wasn't home much in the first place and then to go over things, it was just about the last thing he wanted to do at home. So I did learn more about things [about the NFO] at the office. It wasn't that I didn't like the work, it was just that I didn't like being away from my kids. But it was just another part of doing what needed to be done.

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

Overall, women found community and friendships, and they found great value in the mission of the NFO to promote collective bargaining for farmers. They were willing to join, participate in county, district, and national meetings, and perform work at checkpoints and in offices.<sup>252</sup>

Still, the women interviewed for this study certainly understood that the NFO was very different from long-established agricultural organizations, especially the Farm Bureau. While there did not appear to be a fixed division between members of the two organizations, many Iowans doubted that the two organizations could reconcile their policies. In January 1956, Hillis R. Wilson, a farmer from Iowa Falls, Iowa wrote an angry letter to Iowa Farm Bureau Federation President E. Howard Hill informing him that he was a founding member of the Benton County NFO, and was now working to organize the Hardin County NFO. Wilson wrote that he had been a loyal Farm Bureau member and doubted that anyone had been a Farm Bureau member longer than he. He estimated that the NFO would have 1,100 to 1,200 members in the county, fifty percent of whom also held Farm Bureau memberships. The Farm Bureau, Wilson believed, had lost its community emphasis because it had taken on a top-down approach, and it no longer listened to its members. Still, he did not wish any ill will on the IFBF or on Hill, but only said that the farmers' main disagreement was over price supports. In closing, Wilson offered to take Hill on a tour of the county to talk with farmers if he should "doubt the information in this letter."<sup>253</sup>

Similarly, in 1964 Alfred Smith, a farmer from Cascade, Iowa, wrote a letter to the *Iowa Farm Bureau Spokesman*, the Iowa Farm Bureau's official magazine, wherein he

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<sup>252</sup> Tvrđy interview with author, NFO records.

<sup>253</sup> Hillis R. Wilson to E. Howard Hill (31 January 1956), E. Howard Hill Papers, Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa.

described NFO holding actions in the “northern tier of townships in Dubuque county.” A Farm Bureau member for ten years, and an NFO member for three, Smith found “over 2,000 head of hogs being held by Farm Bureau members as well as others.” He called on the Farm Bureau membership to join in the holding and work together in order to save family farms. In his reply to Smith’s letter, however, *Spokesman* editor Dan Murphy expressed traditional Farm Bureau sentiments, and perhaps only worked to strain relations between the two organizations. Murphy called the holding action a “flop,” and wrote, “I know of no other incident in agricultural history which has made genuine cooperation and trust more difficult to reach. Farm Bureau people do believe in working together. But not with a fence-cutting tool.” This was in reference to NFO members who intimidated non-participating farmers by cutting fences and turning their livestock loose.<sup>254</sup>

Several of the women interviewed also noted differences between the NFO and the Farm Bureau. Divisions between the two organizations actually took Luella Zmolek by surprise because she believed the NFO message to be simple and universally appealing. She said, “It wasn’t too long after you got started, you found out the Farm Bureau was against it... their leaders would say, ‘You know, that isn’t a good thing to join,’ and so on... We just assumed other farm organizations would help us out, but then it turned out that wasn’t the case at all.” Mabel Schweers noted that the Farm Bureau appeared to be on the side of business as opposed to farming. A longtime Farm Bureau member, she enjoyed the social aspects of membership but struggled to understand why the Farm Bureau would not support the NFO and collective bargaining. She said, “The Farm Bureau was more interested in insurance and business and things like that rather than their interest in the farmers.” Along

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<sup>254</sup> *Iowa Farm Bureau Spokesman* 31, no 8 (24 October 1964), 4.

with “the government, and large corporations like the large grain companies, the large packing plants,” and consumers, Schweers believed that major agricultural organizations benefited from keeping commodity prices, and thereby consumer prices, down. And for Schweers, whose brother worked on their parents’ farm in Adams County, Iowa, the tensions between the NFO and the Farm Bureau even caused friction in her own family. Her brother refused to join the NFO and sold cattle during a holding action. He did so with the help of Farm Bureau members who assisted farmers “as a protest” against the NFO. As a result, Schweers said that she and her brother “didn’t speak very friendly for quite a while, but it soon passed.”<sup>255</sup>

Then, according to Ilo Rhines, animosity from the Farm Bureau meant that NFO members did not always fit in with the rest of the neighborhood. She recalled,

You could feel a little bit of resentment from the other people that thought maybe this wasn’t the way we should be going, there were times when you felt like maybe you were left out of something or because you were active NFO members. And I don’t think it was just our family, I think it was, you know, a general feeling among especially strong Farm Bureau people and their activities and organizations.

Personal slights or feelings of exclusion appeared throughout the oral histories, though none of the women reported major confrontations between individuals from different organizations. Overall, any dislike that existed between the two groups did not seem to deter membership or prevent women from participating in Extension activities or homemakers clubs. Arlene Fricke, for example, was a longtime 4-H leader, while Martha Linn, Jean Wardman, and Monica Tvrđy all mentioned that they maintained their membership in homemakers’ clubs.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> Zmolek interview, *Voices From the Land*; Schweers interview, *Voices From the Land*.

<sup>256</sup> Rhines interview, *Voices From the Land*; Linn interview, *Voices From the Land*; Jean Wardman interview with author, NFO records, Monica Tvrđy interview with author, NFO records.



Even with some tension between NFO members and others, in the late 1950s and early 1960s none of the women indicated that they could foresee the difficulties they would face in promoting the organization. One major difficulty was coping with the negative media attention during holding actions. In 1959, the NFO staged its first holding action to keep hogs off of the market, followed by a similar action in 1960. In 1961, cattle and market lambs were added to the list, and in 1962 the NFO ordered its members to hold all livestock. In the fall of 1964, the NFO sponsored another holding action between August and October on all livestock, and this particular action would be characterized by heightened violence. Then, in 1967, the NFO supported milk holding actions, and in 1968 they staged hog-kills, resulting in the destruction of 14,083 hogs. For women and families, holding actions provided many positive memories, as communities and farmers came together, but these were greatly outweighed with feelings of frustration that the media portrayed the NFO in a negative light. None of the women feared violence or reported knowing about NFO members involved in illegal activities, and they primarily discussed the negative media attention as their primary memories of such events.<sup>257</sup>

Holding actions usually began following an order from the national office, or following a vote from the membership. Once this decision was made, members then spread word of the holding action by telephone or by visiting with neighbors. According to the *NFO Reporter*, NFO members clearly expected women to participate in a variety of ways. Following the first major holding action, the front page of the October 1962 issue of the *NFO Reporter* featured a photograph of two women, Mrs. Veldron Hannah and Mrs. Ronald Schweider at an observation post along U.S. 71. The caption failed to mention the specific

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<sup>257</sup> Muhm, 50, 113-114.

locality, or even the state, but commends all NFO women who “did a tremendous job staffing information points and observation posts,” where they kept tallies of livestock on their way to market. Another article described how during the withholding action in 1962, members of the NFO Ladies Auxiliary of Macoupin County, Illinois “took complete charge of manning the office, stood on check points for hours at a time, secured the newsflashes... and helped the husbands on the Minuteman system.”<sup>258</sup>

Five years later, in 1967, the *NFO Reporter* continued to feature women prominently in images of holding action. In the June 1967 issue, a photo essay of farmers dumping milk in Herkimer County, New York included one image of women removing milk containers from the back of a truck and emptying their contents. The caption read, “Women got into the act as the dumping gathered steam. If anything, they proved to be more active than the men.” In Ohio, several women NFO members from farms that produced just livestock or grains showed their solidarity with dairy producers by purchasing numerous cartons of milk from local grocery stores. The photograph showed these women and children standing in front of dozens of cartons, holding NFO signs.<sup>259</sup>

None of the women interviewed clearly recalled utilizing the Minuteman system, but Arlene Fricke remembered that informing other members sometimes involved some secrecy. She said,

If a holding action was going to be taking place at a certain time, or the next day, then the NFO members would come to your house and tell you this was going to be happening, or they would call you to tell you. I remember friends and neighbors coming over to our house to say, ‘This is going to be happening. And it was dark, late at night when they came by... so nobody would know what you were doing.

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<sup>258</sup> *NFO Reporter* 6, no. 8 (October 1962), 1; “Auxiliary is Formed,” *NFO Reporter* 6, no. 11 (January 1963), 3.

<sup>259</sup> *The NFO Reporter* 11, no. 5 (May 1967), 16; *The NFO Reporter* 11, no. 6 (June 1967), 15.

For women whose husbands held leadership positions, like Monica Tvrdy whose husband Edwin served on the national board, getting the word out to members could be a little more involved. Tvrdy said, “It was our place that [the order to hold livestock] was going out from. So if Ed wasn’t there, well I was the one to answer the phone. And that phone was ringing off the hook, all the time. So I took care of the messages because people called to find out what they needed to know.” Phone calls throughout the night were common, and during the interview, her daughter, Jackie Hilger, then added that her mother did more than take messages. Quite often NFO members called to express their anxiety or ask questions about what to do. Hilger said that her mother often had to keep people calm and said, “You just had to talk people through it constantly.”<sup>260</sup>

Holding actions proved to be incredibly challenging for dairy producers, whose perishable products could not be sold after a month of holding. Ilo Rhines recalled that holding milk was not only emotionally difficult, but also labor intensive. She said, “Once you opened that spicket (sic) on that tank the milk was gone, and the profit was gone and it wasn’t easy to do that, though in the long run it paid off because prices were much different after that for a good number of years. So it really was... worthwhile.” Still, dairy farmers hated to see all of their products go to waste, so women often fed milk to the hogs or separated the milk and made butter out of the cream before they dumped it. Rhines noted that few farm families actually had butter churns suited to large-scale production, so they used antique, gallon butter churns, or even tried making butter in old washing machines. The family could then freeze it or give it away. According to Willis Rowell in *Mad as Hell*, some

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<sup>260</sup> Fricke interview with author, NFO records; Tvrdy interview with author, NFO records; Hilger interview with author, NFO records.

women on dairy farms even resorted to taking milk baths if they could not successfully churn all of the cream or give it away. Nonetheless, holding actions were hardly fun or relaxing events, as the milk baths might imply.<sup>261</sup>

Luella Zmolek explained that the most stressful aspect of a holding action was waiting while neighbors decided whether or not to participate. She and her husband, Don, would often go to processing plants to see who was selling their livestock, and when they saw those they knew, ‘there could be very hard feelings because we were trying so hard.’ Zmolek described holding actions as full of highs and lows. She said, “Pretty soon, you know, it seemed like everyone was holding and we would feel really good about it... and then, all of a sudden, it would start to go the other way again.” Yet members often turned to one another for support. Wilma Embree recalled that during holding actions, she would take “cookies and things” to a country school a half mile from her home. There, NFO members would eat and discuss any news about the holding action. Some even “joked about” cutting fences, but Embree was sure “they never would have done it.”<sup>262</sup>

In October 1964, the *Des Moines Register* reported that, during the holding action between August 20 and October 1, the NFO was to blame for twenty-two dynamite explosions in Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin. Members were also blamed for cutting twenty-three fences in Iowa, and eleven instances of slashed tires in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Missouri. They staged eight separate pickets outside of processing plants, and shots were fired in nine separate incidents in Nebraska, Missouri, Minnesota, and Iowa. In September 1964, two NFO members were killed as they tried to stop a truck from entering the Equity

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<sup>261</sup> Rowell, 79.

<sup>262</sup> Zmolek interview, *Voices From the Land*; Embree interview, *Voices From the Land*.

Livestock Cooperative in Bonduel, Wisconsin. According to the *Register*, its report was only a conservative estimate of illegal acts because many farmers were hesitant to report vandalism or harassment.<sup>263</sup>

Again, however, none of the women interviewed discussed NFO members' participation in illegal activities and they believed that the instances of violence were limited and sporadic. A map published in *The Des Moines Register* in 1964 illustrates that acts of violence and vandalism were concentrated in specific areas. For example, only twenty-two, or less than one third, of Iowa's ninety-nine counties had instances of illegal activities. Of these, just five counties reported more than one or two cases. Mabel Schweers insisted that from the top down, NFO members were told not to incite hostility. She said, "They were admonished and admonished and admonished not to do anything violent. So there never was anything I ever heard of that an NFO member did that hurt anybody."<sup>264</sup>

Reading accounts of violence and harassment in the newspapers could be unnerving, especially when journalists portrayed NFO members as greedy or cruel. Mabel Schweers explained that media coverage was vital for getting the message out and garnering public support. She said,

It was a protest... The publicity in the newspapers was something that you had to make, you know. The same way when they dumped the milk. They did that to make the press come and write an article about it so that people all over the country knew what was going on... We had to have that coverage.

The NFO could control the events and holding actions that they staged, but they had little bearing on how those events were reported or received by the public. Luella Zmolek hoped that the newspapers would bring public attention to the mission of the NFO, but found that

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<sup>263</sup> Muhm, 78-84, 167, 175.

<sup>264</sup> Muhm, 175.

journalists were only interested in the NFO when members took dramatic steps, as they did at the hog-kills. She recalled,

Well my gosh, they, you know, they were feeling sorry for all these hogs that were shot. Well, all you had to do was go to a packing plant and see it was a lot worse than shooting these hogs and then dumping milk. And then, of course, they'd come out and criticize you for doing those things. And so, then you'd tend to give it away and do things like that to counteract that, but it did... when you did those kind of things it would really hit the news, whereas you're doing these other things, why, they would just keep quiet.

Similarly, Monica Tvrđy believed that the holding actions were necessary to draw attention to the problems in agriculture, but that the reporting was not always fair. Tvrđy said, “As far as the radical image is concerned, there was more radical action against us. There were a lot of things happening to the NFO members that were never publicized.” If her husband was not at home, she received threatening phone calls, even in the middle of the night, and lived with a sense that her family could be in danger. According to Tvrđy, the NFO not only found opposition from other farmers, but the organization had very powerful opponents, including those in government and in corporations who did not want to see commodity prices increase.<sup>265</sup>

Though holding actions occurred sporadically throughout the 1960s, these events came to define the NFO, making it a highly controversial organization among Midwestern farmers. On a daily basis, even when there were no holding actions taking place, many of the women interviewed reported that their families' memberships caused some tension with relatives and neighbors. Like Mabel Schweers who discussed tensions with her brother, several women talked about family members or neighbors who simply did not understand the

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<sup>265</sup> Schweers interview, *Voices From the Land*; Zmolek interview, *Voices From the Land*; Tvrđy interview with author, NFO records.

NFO and were skeptical about the effectiveness of collective bargaining. In most farming communities, collective bargaining was counterintuitive to traditional marketing practices and opportunities to better oneself. For example, in May 1957, one of the first letters from a woman to appear in the *NFO Reporter* was from Mrs. Pete Artz of Walnut Grove, Missouri. Artz questioned whether there was really a “farm problem” and admonished young farmers who worked for wages simply so they could buy new appliances, machines, and television sets. She was not against adopting modern appliances, but believed farmers should do so in moderation. She wrote of the modern, prosperous farms in the Ozarks where she lived, and stated, “Anyone can get ahead if they wish, regardless of administrations or drouths, if the desire is in their hearts.” Artz’s argument was typical of those who emphasized individualism in farming and who claimed that the NFO infringed on the farmers’ right to choose when and how to sell their products.<sup>266</sup>

At the local level, this difference in philosophy could cause major rifts within families and neighborhoods, or at least unspoken tension. Ilo Rhines explained that during one holding action, her husband Don was outside of a processing center when his sister drove up in a pick-up truck carrying calves. Don asked his sister to take the calves home and hoped to do it without hurting her feelings, but for several years his sister’s husband refused to participate in family holiday celebrations. Rhines and her sister-in-law typically took turns cooking for holiday celebrations, but the incident with the calves “ended that, because her husband wasn’t going to be told whether or not he could sell a calf.” Likewise, Martha Linn

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<sup>266</sup> *The NFO Reporter* 2, no. 4 (May 1957), 4.

stated that she and her neighbors did not talk for more than four years because the neighboring farmer refused to go to an NFO meeting with her husband, Darwin.<sup>267</sup>

In discussing these conflicts, the women who experienced them seemed to believe that they were not insignificant, but they were temporary and eventually surmountable. In many cases, they simply had to agree to disagree. Monica Tvrđy recalled that her husband, Edwin, always knew “when he was getting through to somebody and when he wasn’t.” They maintained a good friendship with their neighbors even though they expressed little interest in NFO. Tvrđy explained, “It’s not that we didn’t say something, but we knew when we weren’t getting through to somebody.” For her, the friendship was of greater importance than the organization, though her daughter, Jackie Hilger recalled that growing up she was aware of an “uneasiness when we talked about farming.” It is this type of “uneasiness,” then, that can explain why women in the NFO experienced such strong bonds and made lasting friendships through the organization.<sup>268</sup>

Beyond tensions within families and neighborhoods, one of the most difficult aspects of NFO membership was managing the farm and home as husbands pursued leadership positions. For the women whose husbands did not take on national positions, such absences were not common and they tended to recall more positive experiences working in mutual NFO activities with their husbands. Others, however, discussed loneliness, frustration, and anxiety as they endured the long absences of husbands who organized other counties or worked at the national office in Corning, Iowa. When they first joined, Zmolek had no idea of the commitment she and her husband, Don, would make to the NFO, nor of the difficulties

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<sup>267</sup> Rhines interview, *Voices From the Land*; Linn interview *Voices From the Land*.

<sup>268</sup> Tvrđy interview with author, NFO records; Hilger interview with author, NFO records.



they would face. Shortly after they joined, Don became the main organizer in Black Hawk County, Iowa. This position often took him away from the farm several days each week, though it did pay a modest commission of \$7.50 for each new member, with limit of \$15 per day. Don did not look forward to leaving the farm, and harbored no professional aspirations, but he believed his organizing work with the NFO would only require a short-term commitment. Luella recalled, “We always had the feeling that farmers would get behind this and it won’t be very long. It would not take very long.”<sup>269</sup>

When Don began to travel more frequently, Luella quit her job at Viking Pump to take care of the farm full time, creating an even deeper economic hardship for the family. Again, however, she did not resent the NFO because she believed that “this was the thing to do.” Then, in 1960, after a year of organizing at the county level, Don Zmolek was asked to work at the national NFO office in Corning, Iowa. Initially, Don turned down the position. Corning was a three-and-a-half-hour drive from their farm in Black Hawk County, so he would have to work in Corning during the week and return home on the weekends. This meant leaving his wife and six children, as well as their growing Angus herd to work for the NFO.<sup>270</sup>

As Luella Zmolek told the story, however, several men at the national office told Don, “We’re not asking you to do anything that we haven’t been doing ourselves.” They had all left their families and farms to work in Corning, and even at the very beginning as they worked out the policies of the NFO, the leadership understood that they would need to make personal sacrifices. In January 1956, just a few months after they organized, members of the

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<sup>269</sup> Zmolek interview *Voices From the Land*.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

national board debated salaries for officers and reimbursements for expenses. All of the board members recognized that “we are taking a man off the farm,” but they were uncertain about the future of the organization and unable to set salaries for all officers. The board decided to definitely set a salary for Bill Barnes, the executive secretary who worked full-time in Corning. Board member Corbin Crawford defended the decision based not on Barnes’ merit, but the fact that Barnes had a family to support. Crawford said, “We have got one man here to see who has a family that we are going to have to protect to see that he gets his money. That is Bill Barnes. That man has given up his farming.” Considerable debate erupted, however, when it came to setting Barnes’ salary. Board member John Warin believed that the proposed annual salary of \$7,200 was too high and said, “He isn’t losing his farm. Don’t feel sorry for him. He feels this is the betterment of his family and himself or he wouldn’t have taken it.” When asked to name his price, Bill Barnes listed all of his expenses, including hiring a full-time farm hand to perform the work on his 240-acre farm. In addition to cash, Barnes also provided his hired help with a house, telephone, meat, milk, and feed for fifty chickens. In addition, Barnes rented a house in Corning and asked for enough salary to cover the rent and expenses. He asked for \$3,600 per year saying, “I would like to go back to my 250 acres as I found it... I don’t want to make any money off of this organization.”<sup>271</sup>

At one point, President Oren Lee Staley, who drove to Corning from his farm in northwest Missouri near the city of Maryville, tried to reason with the other board members. Wanting them to understand the difference between salaries for full-time workers and covering expenses for officers, Lee described how he had to hire two men to perform work on his farm, but had to return when the sows and gilts he raised had the flu. He said, “I

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid.; Minutes, NFO Board of Directors, 9 January 1956, NFO Records.

haven't been getting anything for driving up here. The point I am getting out of this: I don't want to be put on a salary. We are not in an advantageous position to offer anybody incentives to work. I want to cover my expenses. I am not going home having lost two or three thousand dollars a year." He then asked that officers be reimbursed, but asked that Barnes be given a higher salary to "give Bill a little more assurance," and compensate him for his talent, as well as his expenses. The discussion continued, and during that January meeting, members of the board failed to make any definite decisions regarding salaries. It became clear, however, that they understood very well the tensions created by their absence from home.<sup>272</sup>

In 1960, Don Zmolek decided to take the position in Corning, but it did not necessarily mean a steady income for the family. Luella explained that when the NFO was unable to meet its expenses, the employees simply went without a paycheck. She said, "He did not make really good wages. He could have made better wages by working locally here in town, but it was just something that we definitely believed in." To make ends meet, Luella found job as a secretary at the Price Lab School, an elementary school in Cedar Falls. Yet, this left no one to work with the Angus herd or work the land. Though they had six children, Luella encouraged them to pursue an education and participate in school activities, rather than work on the farm. As a result, the couple rented their land, divided their Angus herd with another NFO member, and began sharing the "calf crop." Eventually, they sold off the entire herd to another farmer in Grundy County and, as Luella recalled, "it was a very sad day when the last cows went out of the yard." Nonetheless, for Luella and Don, they maintained an attitude of commitment to the NFO, as well as the idea that "We'll come

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<sup>272</sup> Minutes, NFO Board of Directors, 9 January 1956, NFO Records.

through this again.” Luella believed she would simply weather the crisis until better times came along.<sup>273</sup>

Absences were particularly frustrating because the women were often unable to get a hold of their husbands. Monica Tvrdy’s husband, Edwin, began working for the NFO when their oldest child was just four years old and served on the national board for more than thirty years. She knew right away when they joined that “I wouldn’t see much of him, but somebody had to do it. Sure, I shed some tears [laughter].” Like Zmolek, Tvrdy believed in the promises of collective bargaining and the principles of the NFO. In describing their pace of life, she said, “I knew it needed to be done and somebody had to do it. There were meetings upon meetings at night, and the kids didn’t wouldn’t see much of him either. And then there was the farming to be done, so when Ed was home he’d be out doing what I hadn’t done.” Though neighbors often pitched in, Monica and Edwin worked together and did not hire help. This was not particularly easy, though, when Edwin was gone, usually coming home only on the weekends. Monica said, “When I had something come up I didn’t know how to do, I couldn’t get a hold of him, I didn’t know where he was. We didn’t have cell phones. Later on, when he was working at Corning I could at least call the office when I needed something.” She related a story of when one of their irrigation lines broke and “water came gushing down.” Tvrdy shut off the motor that pumped the water while neighbors came over help. Frustrated by the situation, her oldest son said, ““This never happens when Dad’s here!”” Yet when asked whether she ever asked Edwin to lessen his involvement, or quit all together, Tvrdy said she knew the NFO required a major personal commitment. She said, “I

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<sup>273</sup> Zmolek interview Voices From the Land.

understood that from the very beginning. I wouldn't have liked him being gone as much, but somebody had to do it.”<sup>274</sup>

Similarly, in 1970, Martha Linn's husband, Darwin, went to work at the national NFO office as an organizer and manager of collection points, a job that required he travel throughout Iowa. They had been members since 1957, but in 1970 they moved to Adams County, to a farm close to the NFO headquarters in Corning, and Darwin decided he could work for the NFO and become a “weekend farmer.” Linn, who had never lived on a farm before her marriage, found herself as “the farmer during the week.” By then, she felt capable as a worker on the farm, and also had the help of her two daughters. Her daughters, Patty and Margaret, “learned to hay, they learned to run the tractors and the pickups, and so they were Darwin's little helpers.” Yet Linn was still anxious when she did not hear from Darwin, especially late at night when he was supposed to be on his way home. She often wondered, “‘Well, has he had a wreck?’ ‘Has he hit a deer?’ ‘Is he...?’ You know.” Linn added, “It was kind of traumatic in those years.”<sup>275</sup>

Linn enjoyed the farm work, but because her daughters were in school, she still found it difficult and lonely when Darwin was absent. When asked whether she could identify with the “feminine mystique,” as described in the early 1960s by feminist author Betty Friedan, Linn agreed that she sometimes felt lonely and unfulfilled. The couple had just one car, leaving her unable to attend meetings of her women's club, and she often felt “isolated.” She said,

When Darwin was gone and my girls in school and I was out there with the responsibility of seeing that things went right on the farm, I got rather depressed. I

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<sup>274</sup> Tvrdy interview with author, NFO records.

<sup>275</sup> Linn interview *Voices From the Land*.

found myself sitting in front of the TV watching the soap operas or indulging myself in books, you know, and kind of forgetting. In a way, maybe I even started resenting the NFO a little bit.

Yet rather than relating this isolation to her gender and limitations imposed upon women, Linn related Darwin's absence to the problems faced by farmers and she actually increased her involvement in the NFO.<sup>276</sup>

In addition to performing farm work, Linn believed she was also responsible for attending county NFO meetings when Darwin was "off to another meeting in another town." She began attending meetings in Corning, served as the county secretary for several years, and was even elected as a delegate to several national conventions where she served on the credentials committees and several other committees to which she was elected. Of "actually going to the national conventions by myself, without my husband," she said, "I actually took part in that and I think that maybe that was the roles that women filled was doing some of these things while their husbands had to be home actually doing some of the farming or taking care of the children or whatever." She estimated that by the mid-1970s, "there was probably as equal a number of men as women there."<sup>277</sup>

Among the women interviewed, however, a woman increasing her independent involvement as a response to her husband's absence appeared to be rare. In contrast to Linn's experience, Luella Zmolek repeatedly asked her husband to lessen his involvement or quit entirely. Though Oren Lee Staley served as the NFO president for nearly twenty-four years, between 1955 and 1979, he did not serve unopposed or without controversy. During several national conventions in the 1970s, Staley barely won reelection in hotly debated contests, and

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

it was following one of these conventions that Luella Zmolek realized, “There is just no way we are going to be able to accomplish this.” When he accepted the job in Corning, Don told Luella that if she ever wanted him to quit, he would. So, following one annual convention in the mid-1970s, she asked him to quit, saying that if the organization itself was so divided in selecting its leader, then the NFO would never be able to organize farmers into a collective bargaining unit. Describing the tension between herself and Don, Luella said,

We came home, and then Don went working outside, doing things out there in the barns, and so on. And then one day, he came in, and he went up and got his suit, went upstairs and came down with his suitcase. And I said, ‘Where are you going?’ And he said, ‘I’m going back to Corning.’ [pause] And I could see he was determined, and so I didn’t stop him.

It was not just disillusionment, though, that concerned Luella. Don’s health also appeared to be suffering from the long hours he put in at the office.<sup>278</sup>

Zmolek had often worried about Don. By then, several of the men working for the NFO experienced heart attacks because of the “tremendous hours” and because “the pressure was just really intense on them all the time.” At about the same time that Luella asked Don to quit, she received a phone call one Monday afternoon that Don had had a heart attack. At just fifty-three years old, Don told the other men in the office that he was tired and wanted to go home. On the way, however, he realized it was more severe, drove himself to the hospital, and “laid on the horn” to get the attention of the hospital staff. The NFO immediately sent a small plane to Waterloo to pick up Luella and take her Corning, where she spent the week with Don. Following this episode, Don returned home to recuperate and Luella told him to

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<sup>278</sup> Zmolek interview Voices From the Land.

“find another job.” Though again, he decided to return to Corning and continued to work for another five years before Luella finally “talked him into quitting.”<sup>279</sup>

Like many members, Zmolek finally came to believe that the NFO would not be able to organize farmers on a large scale and effectively set commodity prices, yet she had few regrets about her and Don’s activities with the NFO. For Don, it provided confidence and leadership experience of which Luella was very proud. She related the story of one memorable meeting in Postville, Iowa, where Oren Lee Staley was to give a talk. Bad weather delayed Staley’s plane, however, and he was unable to make it. Known for his fiery, inspiring oratory, Staley was well-known and not someone easily replaced at the last minute. Finally, several people at the meeting asked Don if he would speak, even though, as Luella said, “he had just gone to high school, he never spoke in public or did anything like this. All of the sudden, he is conducting all these meetings.” And in Postville, that night, Don spoke before an audience of about 900 people. Luella recalled,

He didn’t even have any time to prepare for this at all, no notes to speak of, or anything... and [he] did a wonderful job and it was just unbelievable. But I think, would you really believe [Pause] [Crying]... When you become so dedicated that you could do it. And some of them commented afterwards how wonderful it was. And they, it gave them confidence. ‘It shows’ they said, ‘we can all step up and do what we have to do.’ And the leadership that came forth from all these farmers, it was just absolutely incredible.

Luella also learned much about activism from her involvement in the NFO. During the Vietnam War, she became involved in the peace organizations Pax Christie and Mothers for Peace, as well as an active group in Cedar Falls, Iowa called Citizens for Peace. She did this on her own without Don’s involvement, but she credited the NFO with raising her awareness as to injustice and activism. She said, “I never regret being involved in the NFO because it

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid.



just changed us completely. And not only that, we became aware of everything that was going on.”<sup>280</sup>

None of the women interviewed regretted their involvement with the NFO, though all of them looked back with some disappointment that the organization was unable to accomplish its goals in organizing farmers to bargain for better prices. Some placed blame with the NFO for failing to push for aggressive change after the mid-1970s. Martha Linn grieved for what could have been when she said that “if the NFO was as active as we all hoped it would have been,” then rural America would look very different in the early twenty-first century. Though the NFO was unable to end depopulation and trends toward larger farms, her commitment to the ideals of the organization still ran strong. She said,

I have a hard time sometimes controlling my temper when I start talking about the NFO because the passion for it was so great. The fact that it didn’t really turn out to be what we all dreamed it would be is kinda like, heart rendering sometimes. You just want to sit down and cry about it because in my heart I just feel that if it had been, everybody had done it together, we would not have the problems that we have today... I feel that if the NFO had succeeded the way we all hoped it would, that we would still have farms, we would have family farms instead of corporate farms which we are seeing today.

Such passion was common in the oral histories used in this study, and all of the women lamented the growth of corporate agriculture, the decline of rural neighborhoods, and the lack of control experienced by farmers in setting prices for their crops. Like many of the others, Monica Tvrđy still believed in the idea of collective bargaining, but wondered why national NFO leaders did not push recruiting as they had done in the early years. She said, “There’s nobody out there pushing it, there’s nobody to tell us. We had the state convention last year and they said there’s this guy who was going to go out into the field, but we never

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<sup>280</sup> Zmolek interview, *Voices From the Land*.

saw him. It's hard for young people to think about that because you have to have someone selling it."<sup>281</sup>

Internal problems aside, all of the women believed that the NFO had not been successful primarily because farmers, as a group, were too stubborn to bargain collectively. As Mabel Schweers said, "I think farmers are probably one of the most independent people in the world. They like their freedom." Likewise, Arlene Fricke said, "My husband still gets irritated that farmers still don't see it. Why can't we all get together and set a price?" Monica Tvrdy agreed and said the main reason the NFO struggled to take hold was, "Greed. The farmers all these years have wanted to get more than their neighbor." During holding actions, or during periods when the NFO successfully bargained for higher prices, several of the women recalled the frustration of watching neighbors, most of whom refused to join the NFO, take advantage of higher prices, sell their commodities, then glut the market and drive prices down again. None were particularly optimistic for the future of agriculture, and of the ten women interviewed, only a handful continued to live on their farms. Just three will see their children inherit family farms.<sup>282</sup>

For the women whose families became involved in the NFO during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the experience changed their lives and attitudes toward marketing and agriculture. While the media and other farm organizations labeled the NFO as being "radical," the oral histories of ten women involved with the organization clearly illustrate that through holding actions, controversy, and even hardship, they maintained a strong commitment to traditional rural values and agrarian ideals. They placed their work in the context of "romantic

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<sup>281</sup> Linn interview *Voices From the Land*; Tvrdy interview by author, NFO records.

<sup>282</sup> Schweers interview, *Voices From the Land*; Fricke interview, NFO records; Tvrdy interview, NFO records.

agrarianism” and posed an alternative vision of the future. They were hopeful that in the future family farms would rely not on federal supports or the good will of consumers, but rather stable commodity prices set by the farmers themselves through collective bargaining. Their hopes for the future rested not on a social or political revolution, but rather a change in doing business that recognized the rights of farmers to ask for a fair price. When asked whether her friends regarded her as “radical” or “forward thinking,” Marcia Fick, a Nebraska farm wife and NFO member spoke for all of the women in this study when she said,

I don't know if I was forward thinking, I just wanted to survive. I just wanted a way to make a living on the farm and not have to, I just felt like, we work so hard you ought to be able to make a living farming instead of having to have a second income. Instead of me having to go... you know [to work]. I should be able to be at home and raise my kids and make a living on the farm. And I still think that, and we still struggle with that. You think you're making some headway, and oh man, you're right back fighting for every penny. I don't know what the answer is because farmers are so independent.

If nothing else, the women's experiences with the NFO strengthened their identities as farmers and farm wives. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, as they attended meetings, printed newsletters, attended national conventions, worked at collection points, participated in holding actions, and even endured long absences of working husbands, all because they believed “somebody had to do it.”<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Fick interview by author, NFO records.

## Chapter 5

### “You Are Raising It – You Better Sell It Too”: The Iowa Porkettes and Creating Professional Identity in Rural Women’s Organizations, 1964-1992

In 1964, Jan Jackson, the first and newly elected president of the Iowa Porkettes, admitted that for many years she had failed to promote pork products. Jackson’s failures, however, did not refer to making large financial investments, staging elaborate events, or participating in massive marketing campaigns. As the wife of a hog farmer, and the family cook, Jackson believed that pork promotion began in her own home and this was where she fell short. For special occasions, friendly visits, potluck suppers, and other get-togethers, she usually served chicken, roast beef, or turkey. For this wife of a hog farmer near Lytton, Iowa, however, the changing moment came during a visit from friends who lived in the city.

Although Jackson served roast beef for dinner that evening, “somehow the discussion got on Pork,” she wrote, and the argument became heated. One of Jackson’s friends, a “professional man from the city,” said he refused to eat pork, with the exception of bacon and ham, because “somewhere, someone had told him pork wasn’t good for you!” The man’s wife agreed and, even though she enjoyed pork, said her husband would never permit her to purchase it because of its reputation as unwholesome meat. The man challenged Jackson by arguing that if she believed so strongly in her husband’s products then she should use them in “entertaining company.”

At dinner the following evening, Jackson took her friend up on his challenge by serving French style green beans with bacon, scalloped potatoes with ham, and roast pork. The results were nothing short of miraculous. Not only did her friends begin to eat pork

several times every week, but Jackson wrote, “the big pay off – he thinks barbeque pork chops 1 inch to 1 ¼ inch is the tastiest and the best. His wife told me not too long ago that whenever we have company they [cook] chops, outside weather permitting, and a lot of times he will do them in the carport.”<sup>284</sup>

For Jackson and the Iowa Porkettes, this one small victory in their effort to remake the image of pork for American consumers resulted from a diversified approach. Not only had Jackson served several different cuts in a variety of dishes, but she also helped her friends overcome old stereotypes about the healthfulness and purity of pork. Over the following twenty-eight years, between 1964 and 1992, members of the Iowa Porkettes relied on these strategies as they expanded their efforts in pork promotion not just in the home, but also in other venues such as schools, supermarkets, fairs, and shopping centers, to reach urban consumers. Their activities illustrate the ways in which farmers and their families attempted to embrace modern agriculture, as well as the growing culture of consumption. Their experiences are also representative of women’s experiences in commodity-specific organizations in the Midwest. In many ways, the Porkettes renegotiated traditional gender boundaries by working with business and processors. This took them out of their homes and neighborhoods and into the very public spaces most often reserved for men. In the years before the pork industry turned to advertising and marketing firms to head up nation-wide campaigns, the responsibility for promotion fell to women. They believed that as women, they could better reach out to the urban, female consumer. In the process of remaking the image of pork, the Iowa Porkettes also remade the traditional images of American farm

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<sup>284</sup> Mrs. Wayne (Jan) Jackson, “Iowa Pork-ettes Newsletter,” (1964), in the 1971 Iowa Porkette Project Book, Iowa Porkettes Records, 1964-1996, Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA (hereafter cited as IPR).

women, from that of provincial homemakers to knowledgeable, capable, and professional women.

Following the Second World War, the pork industry experienced a revolution that reshaped the raising, processing, and sales of hogs, and during these years, pork production increased significantly. Consumer demand, however, wavered. New vegetable oils and synthetic detergents reduced the need for lard and other by-products, while the growing urban population demonstrated strong preferences for beef and poultry over pork. Members of organizations, including the Iowa Pork Producers Association (IPPA) and its auxiliary, the Iowa Porkettes, reacted to these conditions by setting out to sell the idea of pork as nutritious, delicious meat, and to restore confidence in urban consumers, most notably the urban housewife who made the majority of consumer decisions.

The activities of the Iowa Porkettes also provide a glimpse into how the industrialization and modernization of agriculture affected the roles of women on the farm. Traditionally, historians have argued that during the twentieth century, particularly after 1945, women increasingly lost their responsibilities for poultry and dairy production. Furthermore, with the advent of frozen food and labor-saving appliances, and the decline of important neighborhood events such as the thresheree, farm women were essentially marginalized from agricultural production. By mid-century, women's labor had little or no value, and with no connection to agriculture they had become more like suburban housewives than the laboring, toiling farm wives of the previous generation. Certainly, there is ample evidence to support this conclusion and many scholars have successfully argued this point. On the other hand, the members of the Porkettes and other rural women's organizations tell a different story by illustrating that there was no singular farm woman's

experience. In fact, rather than becoming marginalized, the Porkettes show that it was possible for modern agriculture to actually include women and utilize their skills, particularly in the arena of public relations. Over time, members of the Iowa Porkettes began to assert themselves as agricultural professionals, with an equal role to play in the production and marketing of pork products. This process occurred slowly, however, and evolved as members increasingly became responsible not only for pork promotion, but also fundraising and organization building.

Formed on 8 January 1964 as the women's auxiliary to the Iowa Pork and Swine Producers Association (IPSPA, later renamed the IPPA) the organization was the first state chapter of the National Porkettes, formed just one month earlier, on 9 December 1963, at a meeting of the National Swine Growers Council (later the National Pork Producers Council, or NPPC). The Iowa Porkettes began with approximately thirty members, and seven "ambitious goals": to sponsor Pork Queen contests at the county, district, and state levels; to have a booth and lard baking contest at the state fair; to conduct a survey of high school home economics text books; to distribute pork pamphlets and promotional materials; to establish women's organizations at the district and county levels; and most importantly, to adopt the National Porkettes' slogan: "To Promote the Use of Pork Products."<sup>285</sup>

By the end of their first year, Porkette membership had grown from approximately forty to 240 women, and they made significant progress toward their goals, having held queen contests, worked a booth at the state fair, and sponsored supermarket promotions to expose consumers to recipes using various cuts of pork, as well as pork products such as lard.

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<sup>285</sup> *The Iowa Porkettes Twenty-Eight Year History: January 1964-January 1992* (1992), 2, 11, IPR; *The National Porkettes, Porkette Handbook*, (Des Moines, IA: January 1979), 5, IPR.

They launched a “Pork in Education” campaign to survey the high school home economics texts in Iowa and if necessary, provide home economics teachers with updated pork information. That summer they adopted a mascot, “Lady Loinette,” a smart looking Disney-type sow donning a lady’s business suit and carrying a briefcase. She served as the ideal companion to the IPPA mascot, “Sir Hamalot.”<sup>286</sup>

That September, the Porkettes also hosted a women’s conference at Iowa State University with presentations on the “Importance of Protein to Nutritional well-being and Pork’s Contribution,” by Dr. Pearl Swanson a professor of food and nutrition, as well as “The Meat-Type Hog... What’s the Status (in Iowa), What’s ahead in Meat Inspection,” by Robert E. Rust, an Extension livestock specialist. Other sessions informed the women about pork cookery and organization building, reviewing several films and other promotional materials they could use for their “Pork Month” activities in October.<sup>287</sup>

Over time, as the organization expanded and began to take on greater responsibilities for marketing promotions, members of the Porkettes not only worked to remake the image of pork, but they also wanted to present the farm wife as a confident and knowledgeable agricultural professional. With the development of commodity specific organizations as the Porkettes, a shift occurred in rural women’s activism away from groups that focused on homemaking, toward professional agricultural organizations. In 1976, as membership increased to more than 5,000 members, the Porkettes incorporated as an independent

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<sup>286</sup> Myrtle Keppy, “Greetings to All Porkettes,” (1964) in the 1971 Iowa Porkette Project Book, IPR. Myrtle Keppy, who became the second president of the Iowa Porkettes, found the statewide contest to name “Lady Loinette” to be a major undertaking. She and the other women on the contest committee could hardly choose among the names submitted, including, “Lady Leantreat, Miss Tenderatta, Lean Baconette, Reddi Pork, Porkaleana, Dandyloin, Madame Sizzler, Lady Utterworth, and Mrs. Hampion.”

<sup>287</sup> “Program for Porkettes,” Iowa State University (28 September 1964), in the 1971 Iowa Porkette Project Book, IPR.



organization. That same year, to finance their activities, members created the Pigskin Promotion Committee, which later, in 1981, became the Iowa Pigskin Sales Company. A fully owned, for-profit company, they sold pig-related items at fairs and conferences. As the Iowa Porkettes developed this professional identity, they also began to question the effectiveness of their name, as well as the value of Pork Queen contests. By 1992, the Porkettes came to believe that their marketing and fundraising skills would be of greater service to the IPPA as whole, rather than a women's auxiliary, and they voted to dissolve their organization and merge entirely with the IPPA. Though the decision to dissolve came after extensive debate and two failed rounds of voting, most members believed this was inevitable. By the late 1980s, most of the women believed they needed to integrate their work with that of the IPPA in order to be more effective. Founding member Kathryn Loudon recalled that as women, members of the Porkettes had dispelled any doubt as to the value of women's work. Looking back at the early years of the organization, Loudon recalled that women had been restricted by gender barriers, or "fences." Following years of work, however, she said, "The Porkettes have gone a long ways toward getting rid of a lot of those fences. We've broken them down or climbed over them or dug under them until I think we ended up with a very respectable group of women and a bunch of men who actually appreciated us."<sup>288</sup>

At first glance, the Porkettes' educational and promotional activities appeared fairly typical of those performed by rural women's clubs. Yet when placed into context, the Iowa Porkettes and other commodity specific groups actually redefined women's roles in agricultural organizations, representing a shift not only in the types of organizations available

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<sup>288</sup> Interview with Kathryn Loudon by Doris Malkmus (18 April 2001), IPR.

to farm families, but changes within agriculture as a whole. The Porkettes, both the national organization and the Iowa chapter, were not the first women to organize to promote a specific commodity. During the twentieth century, women formed organizations to support the dairy, poultry, and beef industries, and by the 1950s, most of these groups began to take responsibility for promotion and urban marketing. In her study of the Arizona Cowbelles, historian Michelle K. Berry found that during the 1950s women remade the Cowbelles from an auxiliary of the Arizona Cattle Growers Association that sponsored picnics and social events, to an “organization that came to represent a venue through which Arizona cattlemen could communicate with one another about their collective identity and through which they could promote their economic product.” Formed during the late 1930s as a social organization, the Cowbelles began directing their activities toward beef promotion in 1949, during a period of rapid economic change. Berry found that as many Americans enjoyed the prosperity of the 1950s, Arizona cattle ranchers continued to struggle and “looked on with increased feelings of helplessness as they witnessed massive growth in both the manufacturing and service industries.” Essentially, they feared for the future of ranching “as a way of life,” and not only expanded the organization in Arizona, but also began efforts to found chapters across the nation.<sup>289</sup>

To reach urban audiences, the Cowbelles adopted attractive, slim blonde-haired and blue eyed mascots, Lil’ Dudette and Connie Cook, to promote beef as a healthful, nutritious, and economical meat. The Cowbelles also asserted a professional identity based on their roles as laborers on the ranch, and a belief that women’s work was essential to the “overall

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<sup>289</sup> Michelle K. Berry, ““Be Sure to Fix the Fence”: The Arizona Cowbelles’ Public Persona, 1950-1960,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies* 25, no. 2 (2004), 151-153.

success of the ranch and the industry.” They made a considerable effort to emphasize their importance in promoting beef based on their ability as women to connect with urban housewives, and based on their own identities as agricultural producers. One Arizona Cowbelle, Nel Cooper, asked members, “Golly gals, don’t you know Cowbelles isn’t just another woman’s club? It’s a serious business organization... [through membership, you’ll have] the privilege of being allied with the grandest herd of women you could find the world over.” Berry argued that this was more than simply the rhetoric of public relations, rather it enabled the Cowbelles to establish themselves as essential workers in a male-dominated industry, and it fostered a collective identity among white ranch women.<sup>290</sup>

Like the Cowbelles, the Iowa Porkettes grew out of the changing conditions in agriculture, as well as a revolution in the pork industry that occurred between the 1950s and 1980s. In order to understand how and why the Porkettes came about, it is first important to consider the context in which they operated. During the 1950s and 1960s, farmers moved their hogs from pastures to confinements where they could better control feeding, movement, weight gain, and breeding. According to historian Mark Finlay, hog raising long “resisted industrialization because the swine industry followed both the natural rhythms of the animals and the seasonal conditions of Corn Belt America.” Traditionally, farmers raised not only hogs, but also all of the feed required for fattening. Textbooks and academic studies advised farmers to avoid commercial feeds, and instead allow hogs to graze on legumes and fodder crops throughout the year. Because the animals easily lost weight during the cold winter months, farmers usually sold their hogs following the fall harvest, “causing an annual glut that overwhelmed meat packers and routinely depressed prices each December and January.”

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 157.

Confinements, on the other hand, allowed for more selective breeding and consistent feeding, as well as year-round sales that helped maintain prices and supplies. During the mid-1950s, the introduction of these temperature controlled structures, with mechanisms to contain disease and regulate air and water, promised farmers the ability to better manage their hogs “from furrow to finish,” or the entire lifecycle of the animal.<sup>291</sup>

As a result of confinement systems, and new consumer demands for lean, fresh cuts of pork, the 220-pound “meat-type” hog became an attainable ideal. This was opposed to the “lard-type” hog produced more for its by-products, as well as salted and pickled cuts. Farmers using confinement systems bred and raised their animals to specific standards that not only sold well at meat counters, but also eased their movement through standardized processing lines. At the same time, however, hog farming became a specialized field that required a substantial capital investment in modern confinements and engineered anti-biotic feed. Consequently, the number of hogs raised increased significantly during these years and the number of farms raising hogs declined. The change was dramatic, and during the fifty-seven year period between 1940 and 1997, the number of farms that raised hogs fell from 167,342 to just 18,370. At the same time, however, the number of hogs sold increased from 9.3 million in 1940 to 27.4 million in 1997. These trends did not go unnoticed, and in 1968, at a national pork industry conference at Iowa State University, Herrel Degraff, president of the American Meat Institute, pointed out that the number of farms producing hogs declined 21 percent between 1959 and 1964, with a loss of 28,000 hog-producing farms, and another 34,000 farms either eliminating or reducing their hog production. During the same period,

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<sup>291</sup> Mark R. Finlay, “Hogs, Antibiotics, and the Industrial Environments of Postwar Agriculture,” in Susan R. Schrepfer and Philip Scranton, eds. *Industrializing Organisms: Introducing Evolutionary History* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 239, 248.

though, 5,600 farms increased hog production, and raised 3.3 million more hogs in 1964 than they had in 1959.<sup>292</sup>

Yet, in 1968, Degraff was not discouraged by the declining numbers of hog producer because he believed increased consumer demand for pork products would provide a steady income for those still engaged in hog production. He believed that the main challenge that faced hog producers, then, was not only maintaining, but increasing this consumer demand. His remarks reflected the fact that as pork industry became increasingly industrialized, many urban Americans retained old ideas about pork products as salty, processed, high in fat, and littered with diseases like trichinosis. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, pork consumption steadily declined despite the fact that Americans incorporated more and more meat into their diet.<sup>293</sup>

During the first half of the twentieth century, pork fell out of favor with consumers for several reasons. An increasingly urban, sedentary population demanded lean cuts of meat,

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<sup>292</sup> Margaret Hanson, et al., *Agriculture in Iowa: Trends from 1935 to 1997*, (Ames: Census Services, Department of Sociology, Iowa State University, November 1999), 143; Herrell Degraff, "Introduction: At the Crossroad," in David G. Topel, ed., *The Pork Industry: Problems and Progress* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1968), xi-xiv. The trend of increasing pork production and decreasing numbers of producers mirrored developments across the nation during the second half of the twentieth century and we not unique to Iowa. Between 1969 and 1997, number of farmers selling hogs or pigs fell by more than half a million, from 645,129, or 23.6 percent of all farmers, to just 102,106, or just 5.3 percent of all farmers. By 1997, hog production was no longer a common practice on American farms. Nearly one-third of hog producers were concentrated in Minnesota, Illinois, or Iowa. With approximately 18,000 hog farms, Iowa was the only state to exceed 10,000. In contrast, several states with significant losses in the number of farmers actually experienced dramatic gains in the number of hogs sold. North Carolina, for example, lost nearly half of its hog farmers between 1992 and 1997, but increased production from 10.7 million to 36.4 million animals during that same period, surpassing Iowa to become the leading state in hog production. Similar trends occurred throughout the west and the south, particularly in states willing to relax environmental and zoning laws associated with large-scale confinements. Source: Hanson, 15-18, 84-88.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid, xiv; Dik Twedt, "General Acceptance of Pork," in David G. Topel, ed., *The Pork Industry: Problems and Progress* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1968), 3-7; Roger Horowitz, *Putting Meat on the American Table: Taste, Technology, Transformation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 2. Horowitz pointed out that in 1879, per capita meat consumption in the United States stood at approximately 150 pounds, with pork constituting 79 pounds of the total. By 1966, however per capita consumption of pork was only 58 pounds, while total per capita meat consumption reached 200 pounds.

which they found in chicken, fish, and beef. Inexpensive and convenient, especially as a frozen food, poultry became extremely popular in the post-war years. Between 1957 and 1959 alone, annual poultry consumption increased from 31.4 pounds to 35.2 pounds per capita. Consumer spending on beef products also increased dramatically during this period, particularly during the 1950s as more Americans could afford this meat traditionally associated with prosperity. In 1949, for the first time, consumers began spending more on beef than on pork products, and in 1953 the actual amount of beef consumed surpassed that of pork. Throughout the 1950s, Americans continued to demonstrate strong preferences for beef, and by 1966, the USDA estimated that consumers ate 79 percent more beef than pork per capita.<sup>294</sup>

Clearly, pork producers believed that they faced several obstacles in marketing their products. One of these was the image of pork as an unwholesome meat. Traditionally, most pork was marketed as cured, pickled, salted, or otherwise preserved with what many Americans came to consider as “unnatural” substances. Historian Roger Horowitz found that by the 1960s, “pork was an entirely different meat than it had been a century before.” Products such as barrel salt pork, America’s “preeminent meat in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,” were no longer available on a wide scale. In its place, meat packers

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid, xiv; Dik Twedt, “General Acceptance of Pork,” in David G. Topel, ed., *The Pork Industry: Problems and Progress* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1968), 3-7; Roger Horowitz, *Putting Meat on the American Table: Taste, Technology, Transformation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 2. Stewart H. Fowler, *The Marketing of Livestock and Meat* (Danville, Illinois: The Interstate Printers and Publishers, Inc., 1961), 71, 73-75, quoted in J.L. Anderson, “Lard to Lean: Making the Meat-Type Hog in Post-World War II America,” *Food Chains: From Farm Yard to Shopping Cart*, eds. Warren Belasco and Roger Horowitz, (University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming), 3.

According to Anderson, during the 1950s Americans spent 2.5 percent of their household income on beef, while the percentage of household income spent on pork actually dropped from 2.5 percent to 1.8 percent. Overall, between 1958 and 1968, per capita consumption of poultry increased by 85 percent, breaded shrimp by 120 percent, fish sticks by 53 percent, and beef by 47 percent. Pork, however, showed a 3 percent decrease in consumption. This is especially significant because during this period the American population grew by 19 percent and nearly every agricultural commodity faced increased demands.

developed sliced bacon, sausages, and cured hams that proved immensely popular with consumers for their affordability, meat content, and taste. During the 1950s and 1960s, there was also a sudden increase in the demand for fresh cuts. When farmers raised hogs in pastures and marketed their animals only once a year, fresh cuts of pork were only available as a seasonal commodity. By 1965, however, one survey found that as fresh pork became available year round, fresh cuts constituted nearly 50 percent of all pork consumed.<sup>295</sup>

A persistent problem for pork producers, however, was the continued association of hogs with dirt and disease. During the 1930s, 1940s, and even into the early 1950s, news of trichinosis occurring as the result of garbage-fed hogs appeared frequently in the popular media. These news stories often emphasized the fact that not only did undercooked-pork present a risk, but that raw pork would contaminate anything with which it came into contact. Stories abounded of individuals being infected simply by failing to clean kitchen counters where they had prepared raw pork. One story even mentioned a man who died after buttering bread with a knife used to cut an infected sausage. In response, by the early 1940s, the USDA began education campaigns to teach farmers how to cook garbage properly before feeding to their hogs. And as a result, instances of trichinosis declined rapidly. In the meantime, farmers increasingly turned to commercial feed in order to better manage weight gain. Between 1944 and 1960, cases of trichinosis in fresh pork sausage fell from 12.4 percent to 1 percent in all final products. And in Iowa, between 1953 and 1965, the infection rates for hogs dropped by

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<sup>295</sup> Roger Horowitz, *Putting Meat on the American Table: Taste, Technology, Transformation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 69.

70 percent, so that Iowa, a leading pork producer, had some of the lowest rates in the country.<sup>296</sup>

Yet even into the 1960s, as technology changed and most farmers began to rely on manufactured feed, pork still carried a reputation as a diseased meat processed in unsanitary facilities. Approximately 200 cases of trichinosis were still reported annually, and in 1968, *Consumer Reports* published a damning four-page report on the “dubious” sanitation of sixteen USDA-inspected brands of sausages. The report stated that “whether the sausage came from a Federally inspected packing plant or from the unchaperoned meat grinder of a local butcher, it was often sour or rancid and frequently contained an over abundance of bacteria.” Of 177 packages of sausages sampled, testers for *Consumers Reports* refused to judge any as “outstanding,” and rated only one product as “good.” The rest were either “fair,” or “poor.” Even ten years later, members of the Iowa Porkettes continued to recognize that such ideas about pork were still prevalent. In a recruitment packet, one motivation for

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<sup>296</sup> “The Lingering Stigma of Trichinosis,” *Consumer Reports* (August 1968), 411; For examples of typical articles on trichinosis during this period, see “Trichinosis,” *Today's Health* 28 (October 1950), 6; L.S. Golds-Borough, “Must our pork remain unsafe?” *Reader's Digest* 56 (March 1950), 27-30; H. Aaron, “Watch Out for Pork and Beef” *Consumer Reports* (August 1949), 369; “Garbage-fed Hogs a Public Health Hazard,” *American City* 63 (August 1948), 19; “Trichinosis Incidence,” *American City* 62 (June 1947), 17; H.B. Shookhoff, “Outbreak of Trichinosis in New York City,” *American Journal of Public Health* 36 (December 1946), 1403-11; “One Out of Six has Trichinosis,” *Science Digest* 19 (April 1946), 48; “Trichinosis a Problem,” *Hygeia* 24 (February 1946), 84; “Pork Peril,” *Newsweek* 27 (14 January 1946), 80; “Not Too Rare, Please,” *Time* 46 (3 December 1945), 77; J.D. Corrington, “Under the Microscope,” *Nature Magazine* 36 (August 1943), 390-2; W.H. Wright, “Public Health Problems Concerned in the Disposal of Garbage by Feeding it to Swine,” *American Journal of Public Health* 33 (March 1943), 208-20; “Raw Garbage and Trichinosis,” *American Journal of Public Health* 30 (October 1940), 1227-1228; T.S. Desmond, “Pork Disease, a National Menace,” *American Mercury* 51 (October 1940), 212-16; “Warning to Pork Eaters and Hog Growers,” *American City* 55 (May 1940), 11; W.H. Eddy, “New Safety For the Pork Buyer,” *Good Housekeeping* 110 (April 1940), 79; “Dangers of Eating Uncooked Pork,” *Consumer's Digest* 6 (November 1939), 11; “Manhattan Trichinosis,” *Time* 33 (6 February 1939), 35.



membership in the Porkettes was the opportunity to educate the “thousands of uninformed consumers who still think pork is dirty, greasy, and full of worms.”<sup>297</sup>

Even if pork producers successfully convinced consumers that trichinosis was no longer a threat, they also had to convince Americans that pork was not the fatty, salty meat of previous generations. In the years after the Second World War, Americans gradually became more concerned with weight, obesity, and the connection between a high-fat diet and heart disease. Even farm women, often stereotyped as hearty cooks with robust statures, were not immune to the idealized images of women in advertising, or the increasing national obsession with the principles of diets and healthy eating. Farm women could therefore relate personally to the desires of urban men and women who wished to shed unwanted pounds. Throughout the 1950s, tales of weight loss became increasingly common in farm magazines. In July 1954, the *Iowa Farm Bureau Spokesman*, the official publication of the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, featured an article about Iowans losing weight on a dairy diet. In Buchanan County, Iowa, twelve men and twenty-two women completed a contest the Buchanan County Dairy Council sponsored, losing a total of 280¼ pounds in three weeks. The winner was Mervin Hall, a farmer from Lamont, Iowa, who lost twenty-eight pounds by eating “good wholesome food which consisted of milk, fruits, vegetables, cottage cheese, and ice cream.” His reward was a trip to Chicago for his family. Even more significant, however, was the fact that the following week, the *Iowa Farm Bureau Spokesman* received numerous letters from Iowans, primarily women, who wanted to know more about the diet, and who demonstrated that the desire for such information was widespread. Most simply requested further details,

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<sup>297</sup> “Sausages for Breakfast?” *Consumer Reports* (August 1968), 410-413; *Iowa Pork Producer*, “Pork Education Committee Report,” August 1978 (23), IPR.

but one woman, Mrs. Willard E. Light of Lisbon, Iowa, wanted to use the diet to “advertise America’s Dairyland.” The *Spokesman* editor, Dan Murphy, recommended to all readers that they contact their county Home Demonstration agent, who would have access to information about weight control.<sup>298</sup>

Iowa’s Home Demonstration agents did, in fact, meet this demand. During the early 1950s, many women in the countryside further demonstrated their interest in weight and diet by attending the new “Weight Control” programs for farm women sponsored by the Iowa State Cooperative Extension Service. In 1955, Ora B. Moser, a Home Demonstration agent launched a typical “Weight Control” program for the women of Lyon County, Iowa.

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<sup>298</sup> Cone Magie, “Iowans Prove You Can Reduce on Diet of Dairy Products,” *Iowa Farm Bureau Spokesman* (17 July 1954), 8; “Letters to the Editor,” *Iowa Farm Bureau Spokesman* (31 July 1954), 3.

Evidence from the period showed a growing concern with obesity and health across the nation. One survey in 1953 found that fifty percent of those polled were satisfied with their weight, but another thirty-five percent wished to lose some unwanted pounds. By 1958, the Food and Nutrition Board of the government-sponsored National Academy of Sciences, established “recommended dietary allowances,” for men and women, setting 3,200 calories per day for a “moderately active” twenty-five year-old man. Within a few years, the Food and Nutrition Board reduced this number to 2,900 because they found the American population to be less active than in previous years. In 1964, in response to this caloric reduction, an article in *Time* magazine declared, “The affluent life in the U.S. of the 1960s is also the sweet life, the fat life, and the soft life.” It stated that Americans were eating too much and should take steps to eliminate at least 200 to 300 calories per day. That same year, another article in *Newsweek* warned that in order to prevent coronary disease, it was best to avoid heavy meals like “pork chops and gravy.”

Interest in such topics remained high in rural America, and in 1960, Gloria Whorton of Penobscot County, Maine, told her story of losing sixty pounds in *The Farmer’s Wife*, the women’s section of the nationally distributed *Farm Journal*. Whorton, a life long “fatty,” and the mother of four, had tried a variety of starvation diets that relied exclusively on bananas, cottage cheese, or lettuce, as well as a myriad of other fads. It was not until she began to exercise and eat in moderation, making healthier food selections, that she lost the weight. At a slender 135 pounds, however, Whorton did not claim to find happiness. “I still don’t try to model, or dance in the front line, or attract whistles at the beach,” she explained, “but my weight is respectable.” The concern for weight even transcended generations, and similar articles for teenage girls also appeared in the *Farmer’s Wife*. One 1964 article entitled, “Who Wants to be a Tub!” The article by “Polly,” the teen editor, began, “School’s not much fun if you’re the Miss Pudge in the class. If you’re fat, I’ll bet you want to be slender more than anything (I did).” “Polly” went on to recommend a variety of low-calorie foods and strategies to keep “tip-top, cheerleader trim,” such as teaming with a friend to lose fifteen pounds by prom, or by naming “your diet something clever – like Chubs Grub.”

See Anderson, 3; “Cutting Calories,” *Time* (15 May 1964), 64; “Fats and Diet,” *Newsweek* (13 July 1964), 78; For more on farm women and ideal images in advertising, see Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 171-173. See also Gloria Whorton, “I’m Through with Foolish Diets!” *Farm Journal* (March 1960), 129; Polly, “Who Wants to be a Tub!” *Farm Journal* (October 1964), 88.

Whereas nutrition lessons for the previous generation of farm women focused on putting greater diversity into the family diet and often increasing weight, yet in the mid-1950s, Moser recognized that “over half of Iowa women are overweight and Lyon County has her share of overweight women.” She estimated that between the 175 women participating in the program, only 100 of which were actually overweight, they needed to lose a combined 1,660 pounds. The women began with a weigh-in in January, and continued with monthly meetings throughout the year, ultimately shedding 960 total pounds. For Moser, however, the ultimate goal of the project was to teach these women to better serve their families and make good food choices. In her annual report, she wrote that the women “had become more conscious of their responsibility in helping to develop the very best food patterns possible within their own families.” This clearly illustrates that farm women were not immune to the popular physical ideals for human health and weight. Because rural women shared these concerns with those in urban areas, they could easily relate to the consumers who tended to purchase lean meat and associate lean cuts with greater nutritional value.<sup>299</sup>

At the 1968 pork industry conference at Iowa State University, Dik Twedt, the market research director for Oscar Mayer, stated that pork producers needed to pay attention to changes in the American diet and accommodate consumer demands for lean cuts. Twedt firmly believed that pork could be made over as a diet food and concluded, “With proper selection and trimming, pork can be among the leanest of meats. But does the consumer

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<sup>299</sup> Ora B. Moser, “Lyon County,” *Annual Narrative Report*, (Ames: Iowa State Cooperative Extension Service, 1955), 10-11.

perceive pork to be lean? Just how much of an effort is actually being made by the producer, the packer, the retailer to encourage the consumer to think of pork as a lean meat?”<sup>300</sup>

Twedt’s questions were relevant because if scientists, farmers, and processors could produce a leaner hog, they still struggled to sell this “new” pork to urban consumers because leaner hogs resulted in pale, soft, and watery meat. Other wise known as “PSE pork,” or pale, soft, exudative, it actually proved popular at the meat counter for its lean appearance. Researchers in Illinois placed lean and fat pork chops side by side in grocers’ cases and labeled each with the same price. Yet shoppers chose the lean cuts at a ratio of 10 to 1, and they were willing to pay more for the leaner cuts. In 1960, John A. Rohlf, the livestock editor for the *Farm Journal*, cited a study that found lean cuts outsold regular pork, and that consumers would pay two to six cents more per pound for the leaner meat. Another 1973 survey of 150 housewives in Des Moines revealed that the women found PSE pork chops to appear natural and appealing. When cooked, however, the housewives rated PSE pork chops well below those higher in fat. Reared during the years when trichinosis was in the headlines, most of the housewives overcooked the pork and reported that the chops became dry and tough. PSE pork also had a shorter shelf life, losing its flavor, color, and freshness within a day or two of sitting in the meat counter. Many consumers, then, met the new pork with some

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<sup>300</sup> Twedt, 5-7. Furthermore, Twedt argued that with falling food prices, it was “well within the reach even of those who subsist on public funds to become grossly overweight,” and that the problem was likely to persist for decades. More important, however, was the perception of overweight. Twedt cited surveys showing that most Americans wished to lose weight, even if they were already in a healthy range. This was particularly important for women because the surveys revealed that not only did they tend to have more anxiety about becoming over weight, but they also made most of the consumer decisions and prepared meals for American families.

skepticism that it was actually a healthy *and* delicious alternative to meats with a higher fat content.<sup>301</sup>

Furthermore, many consumers passed pork by because they simply viewed it as inconvenient and difficult to serve. Typically, recipes suggested that pork roasts and hams be baked for forty minutes per pound. The average three pound roast, then, required a cooking time of two hours. This meant considerable planning and work for urban families that increasingly demanded fast and simple suppers. Economist Herrell Degraff recognized this problem, but believed that by reshaping pork and developing new cuts, this could easily be resolved. He said, “The ham, like the turkey, is an inconvenient unit of purchase for most families; but increasingly the ham, again like the turkey, is being fabricated into various forms, shapes, and sizes that contribute much to better merchandising.” Likewise in 1968, Oscar Meyer’s market research director, Dik Twedt, believed that increasing pork consumption in a world with so many food alternatives depended on innovation. The flood of new products on the market was a “reflection of the exponential curve of material progress.” He said, “We live in a world of explosive change. Since the youngest person among you was born, more new products and brands have entered the market than had been offered between the time he or she was born and the birth of Christ.” Yet Twedt also believed that creating greater diversity in the pork industry was only part of the solution. After all, the consumption of products such as beef, poultry, cheese, and sugar increased despite the proliferation of

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<sup>301</sup> Anderson, 3; John A. Rohlf, “The Hog’s New Silhouette,” *Farm Journal* (March 1960), 135; Dick Seim, “The Cost of Pale, Watery pork... Plenty!” *Farm Journal* (October 1973), H-7. According to Seim, not all lean hogs produced PSE pork. It tended to appear more frequently in hogs that had experienced significant stress. Rather than suggest changes in the confinement systems and processing plants, however, Seim suggested that farmers avoid purchasing or breeding animals that appeared stressed or anxious.

Ironically, Roger Horowitz found that even though consumers demanded lean cuts of pork, bacon, an extremely fatty cut, actually remained one of the most popular pork products throughout the mid-to-late twentieth century. Roger Horowitz, *Putting Meat on the American Table: Taste, Technology, Transformation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 47-67.

food alternatives. Clearly, pork producers needed to aggressively market their products as fresh, healthful, wholesome, and superior to other meats. And in order to accomplish this goal, pork producers needed to reach the most important consumer of all: the American housewife.<sup>302</sup>

Rather than let the pork do the talking, however, many farmers wanted to lend their voice to pork products, fearing that pork's merits were going unrecognized by consumers.

Throughout the 1950s, particularly as pork prices dropped dramatically in the middle of the decade, general farm organizations often sponsored pork promotion events. By the mid-

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<sup>302</sup> Degraff, xiv; Twedt, 4; For more on the development of new processing techniques, see Horowitz, 47-67; and Debora Fink, *Cutting into the Meatpacking Line: Workers and Change in the Rural Midwest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

Marketing to the American housewife was also a complicated task because the conditions of shopping and purchasing consumer goods changed significantly during the 1930s and 1940s. Though women had long been responsible for procuring and preparing food, the ways in which they did so and the variety of products from which to select changed dramatically in the years following the Second World War. Historian Tracey Deutsch found that by the 1950s, supermarkets and chain stores successfully established themselves in major cities and growing suburbs. These new stores provided an entirely new experience for consumers, who previously relied on neighborhood grocers with a narrow range of goods, uncertain prices, and limited hours. Supermarkets were especially designed as "calm" and convenient to attract women. Wheeled carts, bright lights, clean, vast retail spaces, and even employees to carry one's groceries out to their automobile eased shopping for women who were either on their own or with small children. Women could also exercise greater individual choice as they perused "self-serve refrigerated cases, produce departments, as well as miles and miles of canned goods and dry groceries on open shelving." More and more, these shoppers were disconnected from local products traditionally supplied in small groceries. They had little knowledge of agricultural production, and they increasingly made consumer choices based on price and the appearance of the product or its packaging. This phenomenon did not go unnoticed by pork producers, and in 1954 Bernard Ebbing of the Rath Packing Company located in Waterloo, Iowa, wrote, "Meat today has to sell itself on its own merits. Quality and eye appeal are of the utmost importance."

See Tracey Deutsch, "From 'Wild Animal Stores' to Women's Sphere: Supermarkets and the Politics of Mass Consumption, 1930 to 1950," *Business and Economic History* 28, no.2 (Fall 1999), 143-153; Bernard Ebbing, "Importance of Muscling in Meat Type Hogs" Booklet 4, *The Provisioner Little Library* (The National Provisioner, 1954), Rath Packing Collection, Iowa State University Special Collections, quoted in Anderson, 3.

For more on the emergence of a consumer culture during the twentieth century see Kathleen Donohue, *Freedom from Want: American Liberalism and the Idea of the Consumer* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Maggie Andrews and Mary M. Talbot, eds., *All the World and Her Husband: Women in Twentieth-Century Consumer Culture* (New York: Cassell, 2000); Daniel Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004); David Blanke, *Sowing the American Dream: How Consumer Culture Took Root in the Rural Midwest* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2000); Richard Tedlow, *New and Improved: The Story of Mass Marketing in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); and Lizbeth Cohen, "The New Deal State and the Making of Citizen Consumers," in Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Matthias Judt, eds., *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 111-125.

1950s, women in farm organizations and homemakers groups also made efforts to increase pork's appeal. In March 1956, the Washington County Farm Bureau women sponsored a "lard bake" contest in an effort to advertise the superior quality of baked goods made with lard over those made with vegetable shortening. The following month, Mrs. Elmer Haegebe of Rock Rapids, Iowa, wrote a letter to the *Iowa Farm Bureau Spokesman* asking for more materials on baking with lard. She wrote, "I think we need more promotion on lard. Our vegetable shortenings are put in front of the housewife constantly on TV, radio, and so on until she forgets how good lard really is." Haegebe wanted to do her part in pork promotion by gathering as many recipes as she could, and by providing baking demonstrations to women's clubs. Commodity promotion for a variety of products also began to take center stage in the women's pages of farm magazines. In 1960, for example, the *Farm Journal* featured a two-page spread entitled, "We Raise It... Let's Eat It: Eat Pork, It's Never Been Better." The story included several recipes for pork roasts, chops, and sausages, but more importantly, it reminded farm women to "tell your city friends how much better pork is now. Serve it yourselves at community dinners and for your own company. You'll help sell a superior farm product, and do friends a real favor."<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> Mrs. Elmer Haegebe to *Iowa Farm Bureau Spokesman* 22, no. 35 (26 April 1956), 4; Ruth Behnke, "We Raise It... Let's Eat It: Eat Pork, Its Never Been Better," *Farm Journal* (March 1960), 134-135.

Examples of early efforts at pork promotion include one event in November 1955, in Peoria, Illinois, when farmers organized the "Eat More Meat for Breakfast" campaign. Over the course of the month, one Peoria supermarket doubled its pork sales, while another sold ten times as much pork as it had during the preceding month. Likewise, in January 1956, when pork prices hit a fourteen-year low, a number of farmers, packers, and retailers across the nation sponsored "pork lifts," or events that provided pork products at bargain prices, often well below wholesale. Farm organizations and businesses even sponsored some events that simply gave the pork away. One article in the *Farm Journal* claimed that these lifts created a "bigger dent in the surplus than Government buying." Several stores offered 5 percent discounts on all groceries, with a purchase of a pork product, and resulted in astounding sales like that in Vinton, Iowa, where a grocery store sold ten tons of pork in two hours, and 31,000 pounds throughout the day. And these events were not limited to grocery stores. In Jefferson, Iowa, a shoe store teamed with pork producers to give away a pound of bacon with every pair of shoes purchased. See "Farmers 'Lift' Tons of Pork," *Farm Journal and Country Gentleman* (January 1956), 14.

In addition to these methods, farmers who raised hogs promoted their product by joining commodity-specific organizations. Groups dedicated to a specific breed or pedigree of swine had existed since the mid-nineteenth century, but in 1934 the Iowa General Assembly approved an appropriation of \$5,000 per year toward the creation of the Iowa Swine Producers Association (ISPA). The state also funded similar organizations for beef cattle, dairy farmers, horse and mule breeders, horticulture, corn, and grains. Because they received state funds, however, these early organizations could not lobby the state legislature or take on political issues. They primarily existed to create a “swine breeders directory,” to market goods, and to educate farmers through carcass demonstrations and breeding seminars. The ISPA appealed primarily to purebred breeders, and the first state board of directors consisted of representatives from various breeds. Leaders also included representatives from the pork processing industry that either volunteered or even “drafted” to serve on the state board. At their first meeting in the swine barn on the state fairgrounds in Des Moines, thirty-two members drew up a petition to upgrade the barn and increase premiums paid for prize-winning animals. At their second meeting in 1935, members of the ISP discussed marketing, “cooperation,” with other organizational groups, and raising hogs. With a limited budget and staff, however, the ISPA struggled to recruit new members and exert its influence within farming communities or within the pork industry.<sup>304</sup>

By the mid-1960s, as pork industry faced numerous challenges, members of the ISPA recognized that they needed to drastically alter the image of pork in the American consciousness. They needed to cater to a newly health-conscious nation, and sell “new” pork

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<sup>304</sup> Rolland “Pig” Paul, “Hog Farmers Band Together,” in Don Muhm, ed., *Iowa Pork and People: A History of Iowa’s Pork Producers* (Clive, Iowa: Iowa Pork Foundation, 1995), 17-24.



as a savory, delicious product that could, in fact, taste as good as meat with a higher fat content. In order to accomplish these goals, leaders in the pork industry also recognized the need for greater organization, and members of the ISPA began an overhaul of its organizational structure in order to include more farmers and their families. In 1962, the state board of directors divided the state into ten districts and held elections for representatives from each district for two-year terms, thereby making participation more voluntary and offering opportunities for individuals to participate. Each district also elected leaders, who in turn began organizing chapters in each county. For the ISPA, this enabled members to stage events such as the annual “Pork Appreciation Days,” held every October, as well as county, district, and state queen contests. To encourage participation, the ISPA also began offering awards to districts and counties that recruited the most new members, or sponsored activities such as pork promotion events and pork cooking contests. Ultimately, the new organizational arrangement enabled local members to submit resolutions that would be read and voted upon at the annual state meeting. It also turned the ISPA from a fledgling group into a “grassroots” movement for hog farmers and pork producers.<sup>305</sup>

Women, primarily the wives of ISPA members, took advantage of this restructuring period to define a new role for women in pork production and promotion. In previous years women had an extremely limited role in organizations devoted to a specific breed, and they had no official place in the ISPA. Some wives accompanied their husbands to meetings, and the annual ISPA meetings featured programs for women, but these programs featured crafts, lessons on flower arranging, or other topics unrelated to hogs or pork. According to the official history of the Iowa Porkettes, very few women were involved with the ISPA, and

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 23-25.

only a handful of wives attended the annual meetings of the National Swine Growers Council (later renamed the National Pork Producer's Council). During a coffee break at the 1963 NSGC meeting, however, several women discussed forming a women's auxiliary and arranged to hold a meeting the following afternoon. There had been no "previous planning or discussion," but when approximately thirty women turned out at the meeting on 9 December, they shared a new enthusiasm for "the impact that the wives could have on the pork industry," elected officers, and selected the name "Porkettes." The first National Porkettes president, Dorothy Collins of Clarion, Iowa, declared that the new organization would play an important role in reaching urban housewives and promoting the "new" pork as a lean, healthy option. Members wanted to change pork's public image through consumer education, and correct the "mistaken" ideas about pork as a "fatty, lardy type" of meat. Collins countered these old stereotypes by mentioning that she included pork in her own "weight reduction" diet. Also, by sponsoring Pork Queen contests, members hoped to "glamorize" the hog farmer and the pork industry by presenting hog raising as a modern, sophisticated, and lucrative business.<sup>306</sup>

One month later, at the annual meeting of the ISPA, now renamed the Iowa Pork Producers Association (IPPA), at the Hotel Fort Des Moines, Iowa women became the first to form a state Porkettes association. The women set dues at just \$2, with one dollar to finance state activities and one dollar to pay national dues. They also adopted the national motto: "To Promote the Use of Pork Products," in order to define their mission. Beyond this motto, however, the exact role of the Iowa Porkettes was unclear, even to some of the

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<sup>306</sup> Don Muhm, "She's Partial to Pork," undated news clipping, in the 1971 Iowa Porkette Project Book, IPR.

founding members. Kathryn Loudon, a founding member who first served as a district secretary and eventually served as state president, believed that the women who joined had varied motivations. Loudon, who married into farming, had long assisted her husband who bred Duroc pigs. Though she rarely worked with the pigs themselves, she still felt a strong connection with the business because she often helped her husband, Warren, with sales and auctions. When Warren served as the president and secretary of the state Duroc association, she assisted him with compiling and mailing catalogs of pigs coming up for auction. And during the sales she was his “right hand man.” While Warren oversaw the bidding, she managed the papers and took the money from those buying animals. In joining the Porkettes, then, she demonstrated her growing interest in raising hogs. Loudon explained that as women became more involved in the bookkeeping and often, the actual work of raising hogs, they “would accompany their men to meetings, and they wanted to be part of the action.” On the other hand, Loudon recalled that other women came to the organization with a particular interest, especially the Pork Queen contests. As Loudon explained, “The women thought, ‘Isn’t that a great thing for my daughter?’ Others, who had had training in home economics, had a greater interest in changing the image of pork in text books and cook books. Still others desired to participate in promotions at supermarkets and at the State Fair, while some simply wanted to provide support for the IPPA by volunteering their services at IPPA events.”<sup>307</sup>

Despite any differences, the founding members of the Iowa Porkettes agreed on several goals that allowed members to pursue their varied interests. These included the establishment of women’s organizations at the district and county levels, surveying high school home economics text books, a pork promotion booth and lard baking contest at the

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<sup>307</sup> Interview with Kathryn Loudon by Doris Malkmus (18 April 2001), IPR.

state fair, and sponsorship of Pork Queen contests at the county, district, and state levels. The Iowa Porkettes typically avoided political activities and maintained its focus on pork promotion. The only discussions about legislation to appear in their records pertained to bills approving “checkoff” funds, or small market deductions that would fund commodity promotion. In 1966, for example, Dorothy Collins of Clarion, Iowa urged the Porkettes to “make your wishes known to your legislators and ask for their support.” Otherwise, members of the Porkettes rarely discussed or promoted political change.<sup>308</sup>

In many ways, the Porkettes were successful in achieving their goals, but they also found it difficult to exert any real influence both within the IPPA and with consumers. During its first ten years, the Iowa Porkettes struggled to gain recognition and financing for their activities. One the main problems was simply maintaining members. Though the Porkettes gained 240 members in its first year, in 1965 this number declined to 160. Membership numbers continued to fall, reaching the low of 133 in 1967, before creeping back up to 244 in 1968. In the years following, membership numbers continued to climb until falling again during the late 1980s.<sup>309</sup>

During the mid-1960s, as they struggled to build their organization, the Porkettes faced several challenges. One of these was overcoming the idea that women should not participate in commodity specific organizations, with much of the resistance coming from the farm women themselves. Unlike homemakers clubs and women’s organizations within

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<sup>308</sup> Dorothy Collins, “Make Mine Pork,” unattributed news clipping (1966), in the 1971 Iowa Porkette Project Book, IPR.

<sup>309</sup> Keppy had little reason to be apprehensive. Even before she became involved with the Porkettes, Keppy led an active life as a farm woman and hog breeder. She and her husband Roy were active in a variety of community activities, including Extension. See Annette Keppy Remsburg, *Rural Reality: Sixty Years of Farm Family Life* (Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2004), 21-76.

Meeting Minutes, Iowa Porkettes Executive Committee (8 January 1964), IPR; *The Iowa Porkettes Twenty-Eight Year History: January 1964-January 1992* (1992), 2, 11, IPR; The National Porkettes, *Porkette Handbook*, (Des Moines, IA: January 1979), 5, IPR.

general farm organizations, groups like the Porkettes asked members to speak with authority about a farm product, rather than a homemaking practice, and to work directly with the public. For many women, even in the mid-1960s, this could be unsettling. As they began their surveys of high school text books and passing out samples at supermarkets, many members reported feeling nervous as they approached strangers to talk about pork. Louden recalled that during her first few supermarket promotions, she continually asked herself, “Am I supposed to be doing this?” Even in 1965, the Iowa Porkettes’ second president, Myrtle Keppy, expressed her apprehension at writing a regular column for the IPPA newsletter, *Pigtails*. During the summer of 1965, she wrote that the job of president required her to perform new, unexpected, and sometimes awkward tasks. She wrote, “A person just doesn’t know just what situations you can get yourself into when you accept a job. Little did I dream that I would be writing articles for publications such as this. But it is like the old saying goes – if you believe in something you will do it.”<sup>310</sup>

In their early efforts to build membership, the Porkettes relied on the district and county groups established by the IPPA, but membership did not expand as quickly as the founding members had hoped. During Pork Appreciation Days in October 1964, the state officers traveled to each of the ten IPPA districts, but as Louden recalled, Jan Jackson, the first state president, often “twisted a few arms,” to find district leaders. Louden explained that commodity organizations did not appeal to many farm wives. She said, “It was simply perceived that men were the pork producers, period... We were just at the cutting edge of the ‘woman’s movement’ in which women were beginning to assert themselves and say, ‘I’m

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<sup>310</sup> Interview with Kathryn Louden by Doris Malkmus (18 April 2001), IPR; Myrtle Keppy, “Greetings to All Porkettes,” undated news clipping, in the 1971 Iowa Porkette Project Book, IPR.

here, I'm part of this.'" Furthermore, while male members of the IPPA generally supported the Porkettes through encouraging language and the provision of a small subsidy for activities, they did not necessarily expect women to shape policy or gain authority within the organization. For example, while members of the IPPA received reimbursements for travel and expenses, members of the Porkettes often paid their own way, or were expected to accompany their husbands to meetings and events. When asked why women would hesitate to join the Porkettes, Loudon said, "We had struggles because men being men, they were not always receptive to having a woman contribute, or question, or make any comments. It was just simply a men's organization."<sup>311</sup>

Other factors that may have influenced a woman's decision to join included the husband's level of activity, the husband's association with a specific breed of hog, the family's ability to travel to the IPPA headquarters in Des Moines, or their experience with raising hogs. In 1964, the Iowa Porkettes recruited 240 new members from across the state, and they elected three officers, a president, vice-president, and secretary-treasurer, for each district. Of the 240 founding members, only fourteen, or approximately 6 percent, were married to IPPA state or district officers. Just twenty-three, or 9.5 percent of the 240 Porkettes were married to the current or past county presidents. On the other hand, nine out of the thirty-one district and state Porkette officers, or approximately 30 percent, were married to state or county IPPA officers. The National Porkettes president, Dorothy Collins of Clarion, Iowa, was married to the president of the IPPA, while Mrs. Gerald Jackson, the state secretary and treasurer, was married to the state secretary-treasurer for the IPPA. This reveals that the women who held the first leadership positions at the district levels were more

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<sup>311</sup> Interview with Kathryn Loudon by Doris Malkmus (18 April 2001), IPR.

likely to share responsibilities in the organization with their husbands, and even those who were not married to IPPA officers appeared to have status within the community, as well as leadership experience. For example, Alice Van Wert, the third district vice president from Hampton, Iowa, was not married to an IPPA officer, but she had experience as a state officer and as president of the Iowa Farm Bureau Women's Committee. Likewise, Mrs. Marian Pike of Whiting, Iowa, was married to Herbert Pike, a farmer, land assessor, Extension worker, and political activist. These two women had a history of community involvement and reputations as community leaders.<sup>312</sup>

One might also suspect that because the IPPA grew out of the traditional breeder's associations, that the women who joining the Porkettes lived on farms specializing in just one or two specific breeds. When she joined the Porkettes, however, Kathryn Loudon, whose husband raised Durocs, said that members came from a variety of backgrounds. While many of the early members had experience with just one breed, Loudon said, "Other women came from families that raised commercial hogs, or cross breeds. It was a cooperative affair from producers from various breeds." A survey of the first 240 members reflects this trend, as only fifty-four, or 23.5 percent, had husbands listed as members of breed-specific societies in the *Iowa Swine Producers Directory* for 1964 and 1965. Yet again, the women serving as district and state officers were more likely to be associated with one type of hog. Of the thirty-one officers, twelve, or 40 percent, had husbands listed in the *Iowa Swine Producers Directory*.

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<sup>312</sup> *The Iowa Porkettes Twenty-Eight Year History: January 1964-January 1992* (1992) 8-10, IPR; *Iowa Swine Producers Directory, 1964-1965* (Des Moines: Iowa Swine Producers Association, 1964).

This indicates that these women may have had prior experience dealing with hog-producers' organizations.<sup>313</sup>

Another factor that played into membership appeared to be a woman's proximity to the IPPA headquarters in Des Moines, or at least her ability to travel easily. Because the Porkettes did not receive reimbursements for their travel expenses, it was important that they be able to afford and have access to transportation. In 1964, the sixth district had the largest number of members, with forty-seven, or 19.5 percent of the 240 founders. The sixth district included Des Moines, as well as the nearby communities of Dallas Center and Adel. Both the state president, Jan Jackson, and the state vice-president, Mrs. Gerald Jackson, lived in the sixth district, though they resided in Lytton, a community approximately 120 miles north west of Des Moines. Despite the distance, however, this town was easily accessible by highways and interstates. The districts with the fewest members tended to be situated in the northwest and northeast corners of the state. The fourth district, for example, located in the northeast corner of the state, included the towns of Decorah and Hawkeye, and had just eight members in 1964. In districts like these, a woman was often the only Porkette in her community, and such isolation may have played a significant role in the initial membership decline. Because the Porkettes set their annual dues at just \$2, with \$1 going to the National Porkettes and the other going to finance state activities, district and county Porkettes were left without funding. If members of local groups wished to stage a promotional activity, they had to either raise the money themselves through the auction and sale of baked goods and pig-skin crafts, find a local sponsor, such as a grocery store or a meat packer, or pay for

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<sup>313</sup> Interview with Kathryn Loudon by Doris Malkmus (18 April 2001), IPR; *The Iowa Porkettes Twenty-Eight Year History: January 1964-January 1992* (1992) 8-10, IPR; *Iowa Swine Producers Directory, 1964-1965* (Des Moines: Iowa Swine Producers Association, 1964).



supplies themselves. For women without other members in their communities, then, activities were difficult and expensive to organize.

Furthermore, these activities were simply time-consuming. Karen McCreedy, who served as the state president in 1976 and 1977, recalled that during the early years the Porkettes had to be self-reliant. She wrote that before the Porkettes gained a professional staff in the late 1970s, “it was volunteerism all the way.” The Porkettes not only planned meetings and events, but stuffed their own meeting packets, developed and printed brochures, and “even made table decorations and centerpieces.” McCreedy found the experience rewarding and valuable to many members who gained skills that “could be used for ‘paying’ jobs later if necessary.” Yet for those early members who lived in more isolated communities, or found themselves belonging to<sup>314</sup> an inactive local chapter, the amount of work may have been overwhelming.<sup>315</sup>

Transportation and access to roads are also significant factors because women serving as district and state officers traveled quite frequently. In 1978, when the Porkettes began to reimburse officers for their travel expenses, it was estimated that the state president traveled 4,200 miles each year. At their estimated cost of fifteen cents per mile, this added up to \$630. District directors averaged slightly less, as 300 to 800 miles for travel to state meetings, and 750 miles for activities within the district. Still, this added up to an average of \$200 in expenses for district officers each year. During the organization’s early years, these numbers may have been much lower because the Porkettes sponsored fewer events, but it nonetheless indicates that in order for women to play a prominent role, they needed to be able to cover

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<sup>314</sup> *The Iowa Porkettes Twenty-Eight Year History: January 1964-January 1992* (1992) 8-10, IPR.

<sup>315</sup> Karen McCreedy, “None of Us Live On an Island,” Muhm, *Iowa Pork and People*, 88-89.

these costs. In 1964, the national median farm income was \$5,689, considerably less than the overall national average of \$7,336. This left little room for extra expenses, and the women who attained leadership positions were therefore more likely to live on prosperous farms.<sup>316</sup>

Finally, it did not appear that the women's direct experiences with raising hogs played a role in their decision to join. When asked whether conflicts occurred between women who did or did not "work in the barn," Kathryn Loudon stated that it was not necessary for a woman to actually work with the hogs in order to express an interest in the pork industry. She herself did little work outside and was never "hands on," though if the pigs got out she "helped chase." Loudon, who had three sons and one daughter, helped her husband with the bookkeeping and other aspects of the business, but she seemed to take even greater pride in supporting her husband through her housework. She said,

Some people didn't want the women involved in the labor of the farm, but they wanted a good meal, they wanted to have a coffee break, they wanted someone to help promote their product, they wanted to be affirmed in what they were doing. And in that way, I don't think you had to leave the house to be a supportive person and be as interested as the women who actually got out and helped with the farrowing and helped mark the pigs.

This conclusion is difficult to substantiate, however, because over time there was evidence to show that many members of the Porkettes were very interested in the day-to-day operations of hog farming.<sup>317</sup>

Beginning in 1979, for example, the Porkettes of Black Hawk County sponsored annual "Farm Wife Clinics," in conjunction with the Hawkeye Institute of Technology. Between twenty and thirty women participated in the two-day workshop, and learned about

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<sup>316</sup> Memorandum: "Mileage Estimates for Porkettes," (1978), IPR; "Farm Structure: Farm Operator Household Income Data," United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FarmStructure/Data/historic.htm>, Internet, accessed 11 April 2007.

<sup>317</sup> Interview with Kathryn Loudon by Doris Malkmus (18 April 2001), IPR.

the selection of hogs, health problems, record keeping, sow management, and baby pig care. An article in the Iowa Porkette's newsletter reported that the "hands-on" experience of the clinic, or working with sows and baby pigs, was a favorite of many women. Furthermore, during the early 1980s, the Iowa Porkettes' newsletter, the *Ladies' Pork Journal*, featured a regular column entitled, "Hints from the Hog House," that included tips for women on such topics as farrowing techniques, how to separate and care for sick pigs, and the newest medications and vaccines. Yet, even with these columns, there was nothing in the *Ladies' Pork Journal* or within other records, to suggest that any conflicts actually existed between women who did or did not work directly with the hogs.<sup>318</sup>

Overall, an analysis of these factors reveals that the first 240 women came from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. In general, the state and district leaders enjoyed the support of their husbands who were more likely to be involved with the IPPA, their husbands were more likely to raise specific breeds, and they tended to reside in the central areas of the state. It is unclear why membership declined during the early years, though their activities reveal that the Porkettes not only struggled to retain members, but also to direct their efforts and establish a clear plan of action. Furthermore, with a state budget of just one dollar per member, there was little money to finance elaborate events. Because they operated limited budget, and were unable to reimburse members for their travel and activities, some women may have withdrawn their memberships because they felt ineffectual or, if they were isolated from other members, were unable to participate in promotional events. Early members

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<sup>318</sup> *Ladies' Pork Journal* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1983), IPR.

recognized their limitations and, as Kathryn Loudon recalled, the Porkettes was a “fledgling organization that struggled, and became.”<sup>319</sup>

One important aspect of organization building was for members of the Porkettes to define their roles as pork producers without upsetting traditional gender roles. They did this first by choosing to promote pork through personal, private actions, such as home consumption, serving pork to friends, and simply talking about pork with neighbors and acquaintances. They believed this to be highly effective because as their husbands raised hogs, the women did their part to show pride in the industry and advertise products. In 1965, Myrtle Keppy wrote that just as the women were proud of their husbands, she was positive that their husbands were also “proud to say, ‘My wife belongs to the Porkettes.’” Keppy believed it was the duty of wives to “get the general public to once again respect the word ‘PORK.’” Not only should they cook with lard and serve pork at barbeques and picnics, but they should also “wear Hushpuppy shoes, hats, carry pigskin purses and only pigskin billfolds.” Rather than defining hog raising as a distinct male occupation, Keppy defined farming as a family enterprise, regardless of whether or not women participated in the day-to-day labor on the farm. She concluded, “Remember, you are raising it – you better sell it too.” Likewise, in 1967, state president Donna Dowden related how she would get up on her “soap box” to sell pork to her urban friends, and she felt it her duty as the wife of a hog farmer. She encouraged women to overcome the notion that women had no place in commodity organizations when she wrote, “I’ve heard many of you say you haven’t joined

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<sup>319</sup> Interview with Kathryn Loudon by Doris Malkmus (18 April 2001), IPR

because you didn't want to get involved, but if your husband raises hogs, you are already involved."<sup>320</sup>

Despite the fact that members reported apathy or resistance on the part of men, when the Porkettes embarked on one of their first publicity campaigns they received much acclaim from the IPPA and the NPPC. In May 1964, an article in the *National Hog Farmer*, praised the Iowa Porkettes for their survey of high school home economics textbooks and urged women in other states to follow their example. The author of the article believed this to be a worthwhile activity because the women were reaching out to girls who would become homemakers and consumers, and they had the opportunity to shape the girls' perceptions as they were just beginning to learn housekeeping skills. This was also an activity with which many of the Porkettes were comfortable. It was inexpensive and, for most of the women who participated, this survey was limited to their local community and involved teachers with whom they were already acquainted. The local Porkettes who participated needed only to send the results of their survey to the state organization. For some of the Porkettes, though, their findings proved "disturbing." One unidentified Porkette found "most excellent materials on lamb, beef, turkey, veal, and chicken, but little or nothing on pork." Another Porkette in eastern Iowa reported that in one of the state's largest high schools, the material on pork dated back to 1944, when pork had a higher fat content and the threat of trichinosis was much greater than it was in 1964. Few who participated in the survey actually found their local schools to have up-to-date materials. On the other hand, they generally found home economics teachers to be receptive and appreciative of any assistance in finding more

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<sup>320</sup> Myrtle Keppy, "Greetings to All Porkettes," undated news clipping, in the 1971 Iowa Porkette Project Book, IPR; "Dear Porkette Friends," Donna Dowden, undated news clipping, in the 1971 Iowa Porkette Project Book, IPR.

information. In several areas, home economics teachers actually invited the Porkettes to give cooking demonstrations to their classes. The survey proved successful and eventually led to the creation of the “Pork Goes to School Program,” a mainstay of the Porkettes’ agenda throughout the 1970s and 1980, which featured school visits, cooking demonstrations, and pork dinners for home economics teachers.<sup>321</sup>

During the summer of 1964, members of the Iowa Porkettes continued to establish new activities at the state fair. That year they initiated a “Products Made with Lard,” division that included a \$25 premium for the winner. They also hosted a booth at which they passed out samples of pork products. The event for which the Porkettes gained the greatest notoriety, however, was the state Pork Queen Contest. This contest became a highly anticipated annual event and, between 1964 and 1985, ten Iowa Pork Queens went on to be crowned as National Pork Queen by the NPPC. In 1960, the first Iowa Pork Queen Pageant took place at the State Fair, and was an event that grew out of other contests for young women sponsored by breed-specific associations. The pageants also mirrored similar events for other commodities, such as Beef Queens and Dairy Princesses.

When the Porkettes took over administration of the state contests in 1964, they sought to expand the competition into more counties and to select county and district pork queens who, like the state winner, would participate in promotional programs. Ideally, a Pork Queen was not just a pretty face; rather they were expected to come from families that raised hogs, and to be familiar with the pork industry as a whole. Until 1971, the state Pork Queen contests were held in the hog barn at the State Fair. Participants did not wear formal gowns

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<sup>321</sup> “Teaching future Homemakers About Pork,” *National Hog Farmer* 9, no. 5 (May 1964) in the 1971 Iowa Porkette Project Book, IPR.

or elaborate costumes, but rather “dressed for Sunday,” and gave a five-minute speech on what she believed to be an important aspect of the pork industry. This was followed by a question and answer session with the judges. Contestants had to speak knowledgeably, with confidence, because the judges sought a young woman who could address questions from urban residents and think on her feet in awkward situations. Following the competition, a red carpet was laid across the sawdust on the floor of the hog barn, and one young woman was crowned as queen for one year. In addition to their title, tiara, and sash, queens also received a cash prize. For the young women selected, it was a great honor. Mary McNutt Port, the 1969 Iowa Pork Queen, recalled that while the hog barn at the state fair was far from glamorous, “the sawdust and the squeals of pigs” did not hinder her excitement at having been selected.<sup>322</sup>

When selected as Pork Queen, these young women became spokespersons for the industry, making public appearances at promotional events and often speaking on radio and television programs. For the IPPA and the Porkettes, Pork Queens provided a highly visible and attractive symbol of prosperity. Soo Klingman Greiman, the 1972 Iowa Pork Queen, and the 1973 National Pork Queen, wrote that Pork Queens represented more than an industry. Rather, “Her position is like a symbol of our belief in sound, solid agriculture along with our most precious resource – our young people.” The women serving as queens took this responsibility seriously, and queens at all levels had busy schedules. In 1966, for example, Iowa Pork Queen Linda Barret was also crowned the National Pork Queen in a contest sponsored by the NPPC. During one trip to Chicago, Barret gave more than twenty interviews, and also made appearances at pork industry events in Kansas City and Davenport,

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<sup>322</sup> Mary McNutt Port, “Royalty in a Hog Barn?” in Muhm, *Iowa Pork and People*, 105.

Iowa. And in 1967, when Mary Ann Ebbing Reiter served as Pork Queen, it was common for her to make television appearances, on either commercials or cooking shows. She typically demonstrated recipes and described the duty as “routine,” though one particular appearance on WOI-TV in Ames became memorable when she used too much brandy in her recipe for “Flaming Ham.” Following a large, but harmless fire, the “ham had been burned a little too well,” and she doubted whether any viewers wrote in to request the recipe. Nonetheless, members of the Porkettes focused much of their energy on the queen contests during these early years because selecting a representative to sell pork was an integral part of their mission. In the days before mass marketing campaigns, Pork Queens and the women who managed the contests were responsible for selling pork and the pork industry to consumers.<sup>323</sup>

Between 1964 and 1970, as the queen contests, state fair activities, and county Pork Appreciation Days dominated their activities, state leaders continued to focus their efforts on building members. In 1967, for example, the Iowa Porkettes began to reward members in active counties with the “Top Porkette County,” award. The first award went to the Porkettes of Clinton County, where the Porkettes maintained a highly active chapter. In 1969, Clinton County won the award again with such activities as a “Bake it with Lard Contest,” and the distribution of pork recipes at a supermarket. Clinton County members also served several barbequed pork dinners, including one to a crowd of 1,000 during Pork Appreciation Days. Going above and beyond the standard activities, they not only distributed “Pork Goes to School” packets to local schools, but they hosted a dinner for home economics teachers

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<sup>323</sup> Soo Klingman Grieman, “Pork Queens Reign Over Industry,” in Muhm, *Iowa Pork and People*, 101; “Another Iowa Linda is National Pork Queen,” undated news clipping in *Pigtails*, in the 1971 Iowa Porkette Project Book, IPR; Mary Ann Ebbing Reiter, “‘Flaming Ham’ is Hot Recipe!” in Muhm, *Iowa Pork and People*, 104.



where they showed the film, “New Facts About Pork,” and provided each teacher with a gift certificate toward the purchase of pork for classroom use. An article in the newly created publication, the “Iowa Porkette Newsletter,” urged other counties to follow suit and noted, “We are so proud of this county and feel that they are leading the way for us to become better Porkettes statewide.”<sup>324</sup>

As the Porkettes increasingly became involved in community activities, a strong core of early members became convinced of the need for their organization. First, Porkettes at both the state and national levels discovered that their services, particularly in publicity, saved the IPPA and the NPPC thousands of dollars. In 1967, for example, the Iowa Porkettes ran a trial consumer poll in Des Moines for the NPPC in order to test the feasibility of conducting a nationwide survey. That fall, the NPPC and the National Porkettes conducted a larger study in fifty supermarkets in major cities including Chicago, Pittsburgh, Dallas-Fort Worth, Raleigh, Omaha, and Minneapolis. Myrtle Keppy, once president of the Iowa Porkettes and then serving as a board member of the National Porkettes, chaired the consumer survey that was designed to direct merchandising and promotion programs. Keppy estimated that by using the Porkettes’ volunteer labor, the NPPC saved approximately \$10,000. She was positive that this activity would propel the Porkettes to greater pursuits, and asked, “Can 1967 be the year in which we really ‘come of age’ as an organization?”<sup>325</sup>

1967 may not have been the exact year, since at that point membership in Iowa had fallen to a low of just 133 members, but a period of rapid growth and transition was not far away. By 1968, membership increased to 244 and continued to rise throughout the 1970s.

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<sup>324</sup> “Iowa Porkette Newsletter,” (May 1970), 1, IPR.

<sup>325</sup> “Porkettes to Survey Consumers in 5 Major Cities this Fall,” undated news clipping, and “Porkette President’s Annual Report,” (1967), in the 1971 Iowa Porkette Project Book, IPR.

State leaders expressed great optimism in these years because by 1969, the organization began publishing an “irregular newsletter,” nearly 500 schools participated in the “Pork Goes to School Program,” and ambitious membership goals appeared within reach. In October 1969, though membership stood at just 253, one article in the newsletter set membership goals for the next year at 5,000. This goal was not unrealistic because, as the author of the article reasoned, “Since there are 13,000 Pork Producer members in Iowa, that hardly seems an impossible dream IF we all do our share.”<sup>326</sup>

This growth in membership coincided with a growing awareness on the part of members that consumers continued to perceive pork as a fatty, tainted, and undesirable meat, and the Porkettes increasingly encouraged members to sponsor community promotions. For example, a 1970 promotion event in Oelwein, Iowa sponsored by the Fayette County Porkettes and the Oelwein Chamber of Commerce only reinforced members’ assertions that consumers were informed about the purchase and preparation of pork products. On 14 July 1970, the Porkettes reserved a meeting room at a local hotel and hosted a private luncheon for ten members of the Business and Professional Women (BPW) and other local dignitaries, during which they cooked and served pork. Before the cooking demonstrations, the ten women from the BPW filled out a survey on their use and knowledge of pork. The survey revealed that eight of the ten did not include pork products in their household budgets. None served pork to guests, and none used lard in their baking. They cited concerns over trichinosis and high fat content as their primary reasons for overlooking pork at the meat counter. They also believed a grading system similar to that used for beef would be helpful, and that they would be willing to pay more for high-grade cuts. At the end of the survey, the

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<sup>326</sup> “Iowa Porkette Newsletter,” (October 1969), in the 1971 Iowa Porkette Project Book, IPR.

BPW members had an opportunity to add their own questions, which they focused again on the high fat content and fears of trichinosis. Some asked why pork had “such a high caloric content,” and “Why are all hogs so fat?” Others asked, “Aren’t hogs dirty?” and “Have they done anything about worms?” This should not imply, however, that the BPW women were not entirely adverse to pork. Several simply wanted to know how to cook pork without drying it out. These questions led Mrs. Howard Fender, Fayette County Porkette President, to write at the bottom of the survey results, “This points up to the fact that we need to stop promoting pork to ourselves and really hit the markets.” And by the end of the 1960s and during the early 1970s, it became increasingly clear that Porkettes at both the local and state levels wished to expand their activities beyond simple promotions.<sup>327</sup>

The early 1970s marked an important turning point for the Iowa Porkettes as they took on greater responsibilities for promotions, and they greeted the decade with a new optimism. State president Kathryn Loudon expressed this confidence in January 1970, when in her column for the “Iowa Porkette Newsletter,” she wrote, “1970! How strange to be in the Starling 70s! There are many things for the Porkettes to do in these 70s that will make them meaningful and rewarding.” She then proposed ten resolutions for members that included becoming “more aware of the in’s and out’s of this pig raising business,” and to “Keep up with my husband in knowing what’s what!” Other resolutions encouraged members to promote pork to housewives; to build Porkette membership and maintain the “up-and-coming organization”; to get involved in the “Pork Goes to School Campaign”; to attend the first

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<sup>327</sup> Mrs. Howard Fender to Oelwein Housewives, undated; Oelwein Chamber of Commerce to guests, undated; Survey of Housewives at event, undated in the 1971 Iowa Porkette Project Book, IPR

American Pork Congress and Trade Show in Des Moines that year; and to wear their membership buttons to “let all know that I AM AN IOWA PORKETTE!!!!”<sup>328</sup>

Members kept these resolutions by striving to develop a more professional approach to their activities. In 1970, state leaders established the new position of Publicity Chairman to handle all of the correspondence and responsibilities associated with running state campaigns and maintaining county organizations. An article in the February 1970 issue of the “Iowa Porkette Newsletter,” introduced Rachel Fender as the new Publicity Chairman, and added that as the organization continued to grow, “She is going to be a busy gal.” Then, in 1971, they added a “Merchandising Department” to sell pigskin and pig-related items at trade shows, fairs, meetings, and other public events. By 1975, the Porkettes, in conjunction with the Elanco Company, began awarding the Belle Ringer Award to recognize outstanding Porkettes for their activity and service. At the same time, their promotional activities became increasingly sophisticated. In September 1970, in conjunction with the National Livestock and Meat Board, the Iowa Porkettes headed a promotion entitled, “Happiness is a Good Breakfast,” for the state of Iowa. The campaign focused on breakfast meats such as sausage, ham, and bacon, and promoted these products as part of healthful, nutritious breakfast. The National Livestock and Meat Board provided the Porkettes with 200 promotional kits, which included buttons, pamphlets, placemats, and recipes to be handed out at supermarkets. The kits also contained audio tapes to be played on radio stations and 2,000 bumper stickers that proclaimed, “Start the day with Pork!” In the “Iowa Porkette Newsletter,” Loudon

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<sup>328</sup> “Komments from Kathryn,” in the “Iowa Porkette Newsletter” (January 1970), IPR.

encouraged members to participate and wrote, “How wonderful it is to know that we can ‘blanket’ Iowa with promotional materials.”<sup>329</sup>

Over time, the Porkettes extended their message beyond fairs and trade shows, and appeared at meetings for organizations including the Society for Nutrition Education and the Iowa Youth Power Conference, a program for young people interested in food production, processing, and nutrition. In 1974, members of the Porkettes also began working with the Iowa Development Commission, a state agency designed to promote products produced in Iowa, on the Fine Iowa Meats Promotions. For these promotions, members of the Porkettes joined delegations that included their husbands, Pork Queens, representatives from the meat packing industry, representatives from retail chains, and a state dignitary such as the governor, lieutenant governor, or Secretary of Agriculture. These delegations traveled to cities across the nation to visit grocery stores and other facilities where they promoted pork to retailers and discussed Iowa-grown pork with consumers. In 1974, for example, members of the Porkettes traveled to New Orleans, Boston, Pittsburg, Buffalo, and Chicago.<sup>330</sup>

Kathryn Loudon, who participated in several Fine Iowa Meats Promotions recalled that these trips required her to be quite knowledgeable, especially about the various cuts of meat popular only in certain regions. In Dallas, for example, she encountered a pork stomach lining on sale at a meat counter but had no idea what purpose it served. Following this incident, Loudon said she wanted to be able to speak with authority and “usually went to the meat counter and did a survey all my own before any customers showed up.” The only drawback of participating in these trips, she explained, was the expense. As with many of the

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<sup>329</sup> “Komments from Kathryn,” in the “Iowa Porkette Newsletter,” (September 1970), IPR.

<sup>330</sup> *The Iowa Porkettes Twenty-Eight Year History: January 1964-January 1992* (1992), 3.

early Porkette activities, members interested in these promotions had to pay their own travel expenses. The IPPA and the Iowa Development Commission provided hotel accommodations and several dinners, but couples had to pay for their transportation and occasional meals. In April 1975, a three-day trip to Houston cost \$157.38 per person, while a three-day trip to Miami cost \$255.46 per person. This may have limited the number of women who were able to go, because not only did this require women to leave their farm and home responsibilities, but they needed to be able to finance the trip. In addition, members of the Porkettes were not necessarily encouraged to participate as individuals unless they served as chaperones of the Pork Queens. In a 1975 letter to county presidents from IPPA Field Secretary Paul Queck asked for volunteers and wrote, ““Producers or Porkettes and their spouses will be needed on each of the promotions (couples are preferred although this is not a requirement).” The women who participated in these promotions then, relied on the support and participation of their husbands.<sup>331</sup>

For the majority of the 2500 members who joined by 1975, their activities focused on local promotions. They sold pig-related merchandise, handed out ribbons at hog shows, gave out pamphlets and balloons at grocery store promotions, staged pig skin style shows,

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<sup>331</sup> Interview with Kathryn Loudon by Doris Malkmus (18 April 2001), IPR; Letter to County Presidents and Secretaries from Paul Queck, Field Secretary, 18 March 1975, IPR.

That the Porkettes served as chaperones to the Pork Queens is significant because for the young Pork Queens, the Fine Iowa Meats promotions were often a highlight of their reign. Kristy Miller, the 1978 Iowa Pork Queen, made five trips to California. She believed appearing in California was extremely important because while the average per capita consumption of pork in the U.S. was 60 pounds per year, it was only 20 pounds per year in California. Miller considered her role as Pork Queen to be that of a professional woman selling pork to consumers. These trips also provided opportunities to meet diverse groups of people, as well as a chance to dispel myths about Iowa farmers. In December 1978, Miller said, “Most of my time on these promotions is spent standing in the supermarkets conversing with the shoppers while distributing pork informational pamphlets. I have certainly met a large variety of people from all types of social and ethnic backgrounds. I’ve talked to vegetarians, and I’ve talked to people who have literally loaded their entire carts with Iowa chops, loin roasts, and spareribs! A few will staunchly argue that I can’t be from Iowa because I’m lacking overalls and pigtails, but on the whole, the consumer response is interested and politely responsive.” See *Iowa Pork Producer* (December 1978), 10.

sponsored bake-it-with-lard contests, and continued to work with local schools and home economics teachers. For most of the Porkettes, activities also meant working with other women, not as couples or in conjunction with men. Looking back to the late 1960s and early 1970s when she served as state president, Kathryn Loudon recalled that women and men only worked together on “special occasions,” and that men were involved with the Porkettes only on a “small scale.” This usually occurred at the state fair or other occasions that required the pork to be grilled, because “they still won’t let the women do any of the grilling.” During these events women poured coffee and iced tea, they served plates and accepted money, but the grill was strictly off limits. Yet Loudon also stated that the women truly enjoyed working together, as they formed personal and professional relationships. Over time, Loudon noticed that as the Porkettes sponsored more public events, members usually gained self-confidence that they applied in other areas of their lives. She said, “And many of the Porkettes, when their children were grown or when some other circumstance arose, have been able to step into the general work force and get good jobs, and their Porkette background and Porkette training gave them the confidence that they could do that.”<sup>332</sup>

By the mid-1970s, even at the local level, it became clear that members wanted promotions and activities to take on an increasingly professional quality. State and county did leaders desired this change and deliberately chose programs to enhance their image as a professional organization. In 1973 and 1974, the Porkettes hired Dan Murphy, an experienced farm journalist and freelance communications specialist, to work closely with Presidents Marie Brown and Donna Keppy to set specific goals for the Iowa Porkettes. He believed that women needed to use their “gal power” to take even more responsibility for

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<sup>332</sup> Interview with Kathryn Loudon by Doris Malkmus (18 April 2001), IPR.

promotions and organization building. In a letter to Brown, Murphy listed several positive and negative aspects of the Porkettes as an organization. He believed the group to be “static.” They were not “growing much, not losing much. We’re just kind of sitting still.” He blamed this on a lack of good programming, a shaky relationship with the IPPA, poor communication, and a small budget that hardly allowed the Porkettes to take on more projects. Murphy wanted the Porkettes to extend their reach and wrote, “We’re probably devoting too much of our Porkette time and talents to ‘selling’ each other – and too little time promoting our product to non-farm homemakers.” He believed change was possible, however, thanks to a “solid core of dedicated gals,” and he was unwavering in his belief that “We ARE NEEDED by the pork industry. No one outside of the Porkettes can do certain kinds of pork promotion as well as this group.”<sup>333</sup>

A year later, in December 1974, Murphy wrote again to President Donna Keppy and asked her to “prod” more members into action and “think and work beyond the farm gate.” He wrote a speech for Keppy to deliver at the annual meeting, in which he looked toward 1975 as a turning point for the organization. In the speech, Murphy addressed women’s reluctance to participate in a commodity organization, but cited economic motivations for women to become more active in the Porkettes. He wrote, “The thought of getting out of our friendly little farm group and taking pork messages to city homemakers is a little scary for all of us. But the purpose is to make our own hog production more profitable... and each of us knows that we need a new stove, some tuition money, or new tires for the pickup. As Porkettes, we can promote pork and improve the profit picture of our own farms, which

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<sup>333</sup> Dan Murphy to Marie Brown, undated, IPR. Murphy worked as a communications consultant for several agricultural organizations, including the IPPA. The Porkettes paid Murphy for consultations, speeches, press releases, and other communications needs, though the budget for such items remained modest. In 1975, for example, the Porkettes paid Murphy just \$514 out of an annual budget of approximately \$8,500. In 1976



makes our work important.” Murphy also encouraged women to step up their communications with urban consumers by finding opportunities for the Porkettes, 4-H groups, and Pork Queens to appear on television, the radio, and before non-farm groups. He wrote, “It is nice to sell each other cook books, but the challenge is to get pork information to city homemakers.”<sup>334</sup>

Murphy’s experience as a farm journalist, particularly his work with the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation and other large agricultural organizations, taught him the importance of women’s groups to the overall growth of an organization. Yet he also recognized that he took some risks by encouraging the Porkettes to increase their dues and to ask for greater appropriations from the IPPA. In another letter to Donna Keppy, Murphy proposed that the Porkettes push for a dual membership structure so that husbands and wives would pay one membership fee to the IPPA. This single fee would then be split between the two organizations, and would result in more money going to women at the state, county, and local levels. It might also encourage more women to become involved because they would not need to ask for additional money, or consider their membership fee to be an additional expense. This was something that the women had to ask for on their own, however, as Murphy wrote, “I’d get in trouble if the men knew I was helping you raid their sacred treasury... but you gals do give the organization a huge lift and should receive consideration when funds and personnel assistance are being passed out.”<sup>335</sup>

This dual dues structure did not materialize because in 1976, concern for financial and legal liability led the Porkettes to incorporate as a not-for-profit organization. The

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<sup>334</sup> Dan Murphy to Donna Keppy, undated, IPR; Dan Murphy, “Challenge to the Porkettes,” a speech to be delivered by Donna Keppy, IPR.

<sup>335</sup> Dan Murphy to Donna Keppy, undated, IPR.

Porkettes continued to collect their own dues, and many members viewed incorporation as a promotion out of auxiliary status, but they remained linked to the IPPA through a memorandum of understanding. The IPPA not only provided a subsidy, as well as office space and operating expenses, but some members may have also been reluctant to accept a dual dues structure because the Porkettes did not always receive the promised financial assistance from the IPPA, or at least they did not always receive the money in a timely manner. Even in 1978, after the Porkettes had incorporated, the IPPS Executive Secretary, Russ Sanders, apologized to Porkettes Treasurer, Sue Henrich, for his delay in sending the quarterly Porkette subsidy. He wrote, "I want to apologize for manner in which timeliness of this payment has been handled in the past. Hopefully we'll be able to start getting these checks to you on time," and he encouraged Henrich to advise him on improving the "financial relationship" between the Porkettes and the IPPA.<sup>336</sup>

Regardless of funding from the IPPA, Porkette membership continued grow, garnering more money and support for the organization. During the late 1970s, membership drew dramatically, from 1647 members in 1974 to 5671 members in 1979. Across state, eighty-three of ninety-nine counties had Porkette organizations. During the same period, total state disbursements increased more than three fold from \$10,217 in 1974 to \$35,806 in 1979. Membership dues accounted for most of this growth, with dues totaling just \$5,414 in 1975

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<sup>336</sup> Russ Sanders to Sue Henrich, 18 May 1978, IPR.

The Memorandum of Understanding between the Porkettes and the IPPA clearly detailed the relationship between the organizations and the responsibilities of each. For example, the 1982 memorandum stated that the Porkettes were entitled to space in the IPPA State Office, but the Porkettes could not utilize IPPA clerical services and had to reimburse the IPPA for any office supplies (postage, stationery, paper, envelopes, etc.) they used. Furthermore, the Porkettes could utilize space in the IPPA State Office for storage of organizational supplies and equipment, but not for the storage or handling of merchandise. They managed public relations by requiring the Porkettes to contact the IPPA before issuing and official public statements, and by granting the Porkettes space in the Iowa Pork Producers magazine. Finally, if conflicts or difference in opinions existed, both organizations were committed to resolve these problems. See "Memorandum of Understanding Between the Iowa Pork Producers Association and the Iowa Porkettes," 15 December 1982, IPR.

but reaching \$22,000 by 1979. The IPPA also increased its general subsidy to the Porkettes, from \$1,500 in 1975 to \$3,000 in 1980, with sporadic funding of various Porkette programs. State Porkette leaders put this additional money into reimbursing state and district officers for travel to meetings, as well as office supplies, postage, and hiring professional services through an advertising agency.<sup>337</sup>

These changes occurred slowly, however, as Porkette leaders made deliberate choices and small steps toward changing the image of pork and pork producers. In January 1975, when the Iowa Porkettes established a long-range planning committee at the state level, members of the committee appeared to share Murphy's vision for the future. In that meeting, state leaders retained old missions, such as queen contests and serving pork products as conventions, but they adopted several new goals, particularly shifting their focus from home pork consumption to working with institutional food programs. To carry out this plan, they developed a three-part plan to be carried out over a period of several years. The first stage involved gathering information and contacting dieticians, extension workers, hospital staff, educators, and others. They realized that for institutions, cost was the bottom line, so the second stage involved putting together promotional materials for institutions within the state that promoted pork as both economical and nutritious. Finally, in the third stage, the Porkettes hoped to market their "package plan" throughout the country. One way to implement this plan was to continue with queen contests and the Fine Iowa Meats promotions, but also to make these contests and promotions more visible to the public.<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> "Budget," (31 December 1974), IPR; "Iowa Porkettes Financial Statement," (31 December 1975), IPR. "Iowa Porkettes Financial Statement," (31 December 1976), IPR; "Iowa Porkettes Financial Statement," (31 December 1977), IPR; "Iowa Porkettes Financial Statement," (31 December 1978), IPR; "Iowa Porkettes Revised Budget, 1979" (undated), IPR; "Iowa Porkettes Proposed and Revised Budget, 1980" (undated), IPR.

<sup>338</sup> Porkette Long Range Planning Committee Meeting (8 January 1975), IPR.

In addition to working with institutional consumption, the Porkettes looked to educate professionals in the food industry. In 1975, members of the Long Range Planning Committee discussed the fact that the manufacturers of food and meat thermometers contributed to outdated notions of pork by publishing incorrect information on the preparation and cooking of pork products. At that time, most recipes suggested cooking pork for long periods at high temperatures, primarily to reduce the risk of trichinosis. When cooking the “new” pork however, these methods resulted in dry, tough meat. During the 1960s, research at Iowa State University found that trichinae larvae could be eliminated when infected meat was cooked at 140 F, significantly lower than previously thought. During the 1930s, many home economists recommended that pork be cooked to an internal temperature of 185 F. In light of the new research, however, Dr. Agnes Carlin, a Professor of Food and Nutrition at Iowa State, found that pork could be safely consumed if cooked to an internal temperature of 170 F. When cooked at a lower temperature for shorter periods, the “new” pork retained its juiciness and flavor. And in order to educate food professionals, the Porkettes began a new project to have companies change their food thermometers and recommended cooking methods. The first stage of the project asked local members to survey the meat thermometers sold in local stores, to determine which companies still recommended pork to be cooked at 185 F. The second stage was to contact these companies, and to produce pamphlets in the shape of “pseudo thermometers” for food editors, restaurants, and institutions.<sup>339</sup>

In the first stage of the thermometer project, the Porkettes found that most meat thermometers were incorrect, as they had assumed. Bernice Bair of Atlantic, Iowa, and the

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<sup>339</sup> Agnes Carlin, *Destruction of Trichina Larvae in Cooked Pork Roasts*, An-141, 2766 (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Cooperative Extension Service, 1965); Porkette Long Range Planning Committee Meeting (8 January 1975), IPR.

chair of the state Thermometer Committee, found that “90 percent of the thermometers in local stores are incorrect.” The next phase, she believed, should be a letter writing campaign to the manufacturers of these meat thermometers and other companies. Before they began, Baier enlisted the help of Agnes Carlin, who had carried out the research, so that members writing letters could include the correct scientific facts in their letters. In this phase, however, members found mixed results. In July 1975, Joyce Oberman of Iowa City, who formerly served as state secretary, wrote to the General Foods Consumer Center in New York to complain that a recipe for pork chops on the back of a Post Grape-Nuts cereal box was incorrect. She enclosed a leaflet from the National Livestock and Meat Board entitled “Facts About Pork.” In response, a consumer representative from General Foods returned the leaflet and kindly informed Oberman that if not cooked to 180F, consumers risked being infected with trichinosis. Undeterred, Oberman wrote again, this time informing the consumer representative that she was “misinformed.” Oberman enclosed articles about the research performed at Iowa State, and she asked that the home economist working for General Foods try experimenting with lower cooking temperatures. In her conclusion, Oberman wrote, “It is cooking instructions like these that give pork a bad reputation because of what the end product is like. I agree the nutritional pork is excellent, but unless it tastes good when it gets to the table consumers won’t want to eat or serve it again.” Oberman also wrote a letter to the head of the National Livestock and Meat Board to ask that new cooking information be put in their leaflets on pork. Citing the incident with General Foods, Oberman wrote The question of the possibility of trichinosis from undercooked pork is a persistent one. “The letter from Mrs. Lowry strengthens my feelings about this even more. I have felt for several years that

we are making a mistake when we do not come right out in black and white letters and tell consumers in the pork leaflets what has been discovered at ISU.”<sup>340</sup>

While Oberman’s letters illustrate the persistence of negative attitudes toward pork, the Porkettes enjoyed considerable success in writing to the manufacturers of meat thermometers. In November 1975, Robert Rohrer, the Executive Vice President of the Ohio Thermometer Company in Springfield, Ohio, replied to a letter from Bernice Baier, the chair of the Thermometer Committee. Rohrer appeared to be convinced and passed Baier’s letter on to the engineering department. He also wanted to know more about the Porkettes’ efforts and asked that they share their findings, especially as to whether other companies would also change their thermometers. In light of Baier’s “extremely logical” criticism, Rohrer assured her that the Ohio Thermometer Company was making preparations to change their scales. Overall, Baier considered the thermometer campaign to be a major accomplishment. In a January 1976 report to Porkette President, Donna Keppy, Baier wrote that several thermometer companies responded with enthusiasm. One unnamed company actually asked members of the Porkettes to “help design and set up a scale for their thermometer – which we did.” In light of this success, members of the Porkettes were careful to publicize their activities and their results, and thereby combine this activity with consumer education. Baier reported that she and other Porkettes had appeared on radio programs coming out of several small cities, and in October 1976, they published articles in their local newspapers about the proper cooking methods for pork.<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> Page Lowry, Consumer Representative at the General Foods Consumer Center, to Joyce Oberman (14 July 1975), IPR; Joyce Oberman to Page Lowry (22 July 1975), IPR; Joyce Oberman to Verle Butz (23 July 1975), IPR.

<sup>341</sup> Robert Rohrer to Bernice Baier (21 November 1975), IPR; Bernice Baier to Donna Keppy (12 January 1976), IPR.

Merchandising, fundraising, and financial management proved to be an important aspect of their long range plan. In addition to promoting meat products they sought to sell pigskin to consumers for use in clothing, decorations, and crafts. Beginning in the early 1970s, the Porkettes sponsored pigskin style shows at their annual meetings, but in May 1976, Porkette President Karen McCreedy established a five-member state Pigskin Promotion Committee in order to promote the product more effectively. Furthermore, the state organization decided to end all general merchandising and focus its efforts on pigskin. Beginning with a budget of \$9,500, members of the committee kept supplies of pigskin on hand for use by the Porkettes, but they also developed slideshows for use at sewing classes or on television. Judy Antone of West Branch, the first chair of the Iowa Pigskin Committee, recalled that committee members were constantly busy and not “a week went by when we weren’t promoting pigskin somewhere.” The Pigskin Committee also provided income for the Porkettes, with its sale of merchandise. In 1976, for example, the sale of pig-related merchandise resulted in a profit of \$2,700, or approximately 18 percent of the total annual income of \$14,897.<sup>342</sup>

While incorporation, the thermometer campaign, and the establishment of the Pigskin Committee indicated that the Porkettes were headed in a new direction, these did little to change the status of the organization compared to the introduction of the “Iowa Chop,” in 1976. The brainchild of Russ Sanders, then of the Iowa Development Commission, the newly coined “Iowa Chop,” was a fresh center-cut, 1.25-1.5 inch thick chop weighing approximately 10-15 ounces. Though the pork chop itself was nothing new, Sanders and

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<sup>342</sup> Judy Antone, “Pigskin – Our Prettiest Byproduct,” in Muhm, *Iowa Pork and People*, 90-91; “Iowa Porkettes Financial Statement,” (31 December 1976), IPR.

other IPPA leaders developed the “Iowa Chop” as representative of the juicy, lean, quality pork produced in Iowa. Members of the Iowa Chop Committee, within the IPPA, intended the “Iowa Chop” to become what the “New York Strip,” had become for the beef industry, a delicious, high-end meat that appealed to consumers for its freshness, flavor, tenderness, and culinary diversity. In order to promote this new concept in pork, the Iowa Chop Committee immediately turned to the Porkettes to market the name “Iowa Chop” to consumers and restaurants. Because neither the IPPA nor the Iowa Development Commission could afford to produce television commercials that could reach a broad consumer base, they relied primarily on printed materials, as well as word of mouth, in-store promotions, and the cooperation of restaurants. Most importantly, however, the IPPA needed the volunteer services of the Porkettes, and they not only asked for the Porkettes’ services, but also provided the necessary financial backing. This is what partially accounted for the increase in the Porkette budget. The Pork in Education Committee, the Porkette group in charge of promoting the “Iowa Chop,” saw a dramatic increase in their budget in just a few years. In 1976, for example, the Porkettes allocated \$633.07 to the Pork in Education Committee. This was considerably greater than the \$363.49 allocated in 1975, but by 1977, the amount grew to \$4,734.84, and by 1978, the committee had a budget of \$6,000, \$3,500 of which came in the form of an IPPA subsidy.<sup>343</sup>

During the summer of 1976, the Porkettes sponsored an initial testing program with four restaurants in cities around the state: Porky’s Red Carpet in Waterloo, Seven Nations in

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<sup>343</sup> Russ Sanders, “Iowa Chop Update,” (23 August 1977), IPR; “Budget,” (31 December 1974), IPR; “Iowa Porkettes Financial Statement,” (31 December 1975), IPR. “Iowa Porkettes Financial Statement,” (31 December 1976), IPR; “Iowa Porkettes Financial Statement,” (31 December 1977), IPR; “Iowa Porkettes Financial Statement,” (31 December 1978), IPR; “Iowa Porkettes Revised Budget, 1979” (undated), IPR; “Iowa Porkettes Proposed and Revised Budget, 1980” (undated), IPR;



Mason City, the Carousel Inn in Iowa City, and Palmas in Ames. By the end of September 1976, the testing program proved successful. The managers at each restaurant reported that the Iowa Chop was very competitive with New York Strip steaks, and they sold between thirty and 100 chops per week. Ermal Loghry, owner of the Carousel Inn, participated in the test despite his initial doubts. He told a reporter from the *Des Moines Register*, “Pork chops have always had a bad press. People who eat them and people who cook them have had the idea that you have to burn a chop to get all the pink out of it. But you don’t need temperatures nearly as high as people have thought to eliminate the dangers of trichinosis.” Loghry decided to take a “basic and natural” approach to cooking chops, and by the end of the test decided to reprint menus to include the Iowa Chop as a regular item. Likewise, LaDonna Marter, the owner and manager of Porky’s Red Carpet, found the Iowa Chop to be a highly versatile item, selling as either a simple meal or a more elegant option. Marter offered a Pork Chop dinner with salad and baked potato for \$4.95, but also served a fine Pork Chop and Lobster dinner for \$10.95, showing that the Iowa Chop need not be considered a provincial item.<sup>344</sup>

Overall, the testing program demonstrated that the Iowa Chop concept could persuade consumers to eat more pork, and the Porkettes, through the Iowa Chop Committee, began formulating plans to promote the Iowa Chop statewide during October 1976. Judy Scheffler, chairman of the Iowa Chop Committee, sent out promotion kits to county Porkette presidents and outlined their strategy for placing the Iowa Chop in “as many Iowa Restaurants as Possible.” The goal for October, or Pork Month, was to convince the proprietors of three

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<sup>344</sup> “Iowa Chop Test Restaurant Program: A Summary,” (23 September 1976), IPR; Steve Weinberg, “Pork Purists Arise: Hail the Iowa Chop,” *Des Moines Register* (6 March 1977).

restaurants in each county to put the Iowa Chop on their menus. These were not necessarily to be local diners, however, but more up-scale establishments including country clubs, hotel-motel affiliates, and dinner clubs. Restaurant should be carefully selected based on reputation and its ability to advertise. To assist the ninety participating counties in reaching this goal, the promotional kits included materials to help defray the costs for restaurants, including 225 menu clip-ons, posters, cooking suggestions, recipe ideas, pamphlets, and advertising slicks for newspapers. The kits also included lists of meat distributors, in case supply was an issue for proprietors, as well as sample press releases. In this campaign, the Porkettes assumed the very new, and often intimidating responsibility of acting as liaison not only between the IPPA and restaurants, but also the Iowa Development Commission, packers, and distributors. In her letter to county Porkette presidents, Scheffler acknowledged that approaching restaurant owners could be daunting, but offered several suggestions to help Porkettes overcome any anxieties. She urged the women to “be prepared” and “know what you’re talking about,” by cooking the Iowa Chop themselves, and offering samples. They could also team up with a male IPPA member. Scheffler believed this to be particularly effective because the restaurant managers would see that “the Iowa Chop is of such importance that a busy Pork Producer will take time out at harvest to visit with him about the chop.” She also suggested that the Porkettes could heighten awareness by contacting their local radio stations and newspapers, or hosting dinners for local townspeople.<sup>345</sup>

While the Porkettes did not reach their goal by October’s end, the Porkettes did succeed in placing the Iowa Chop on the menus of fifty restaurants across the state, and

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<sup>345</sup> Judy Scheffler, Chairman of the Porkette Iowa Chop Committee to County Porkette Presidents, September 1976, IPR

doubled this number by March 1977. Russ Sanders, of the Iowa development Commission, considered this to be a success and gave the Porkettes full credit. Sanders was even more impressed with the Porkettes' ability to work with meat distributors and convince them of the Iowa Chop's potential as a marketable product. For example, following extensive meetings with the Porkettes, Harker's Wholesale Meats of LeMars, Iowa agreed to include the Iowa Chop in their printed supply list. Because Harker's operated in seven states, Sanders was now optimistic that the concept would soon catch on outside of Iowa.<sup>346</sup>

Building on their Pork Month activities, the Porkettes continued to actively promote the Iowa Chop throughout 1976 and 1977. In November, Scheffler sent another letter to the county Porkette Presidents to report on activities across the state and to provide encouragement and new, inexpensive ideas for local promotions. For example, the Porkettes of Washington County came up with a catchy slogan, "Hop to the top with the Iowa Chop," and then ran the following advertisement in the classified section of their local newspaper:

- "Clue 1: Just what is the IOWA CHOP?
- "Clue 2: The IOWA CHOP is not the newest dance craze.
- "Clue 3: The IOWA CHOP is not the latest method of self defense.
- "Clue 4: The IOWA CHOP is not the latest hairstyle.
- "Clue 5: The IOWA CHOP is not the latest innovation in harvesting feed grains.
- "Clue 6: The IOWA CHOP is the center cut, 1¼ to 1½ thick, pork chop."

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<sup>346</sup> Judy Scheffler, Chairman of the Porkette Iowa Chop Committee to County Porkette Presidents, September 1976, IPR; Russ Sanders, "Iowa Chop Project Status Report," (9 March 1977), IPR.

Certainly, not everyone was convinced of the Iowa Chop's distinctiveness. In March 1977, Josef Mossman, food critic for the *Des Moines Register*, was very critical of the idea that the Iowa Chop was something new. While he enjoyed the "juicy and tender and flavorful." pork chop served at Babe's Restaurant in downtown Des Moines, he wondered, "So what made the 'new' Iowa Chop different from the thick, juicy, tender pork chops I have eaten on other occasions over the years? Ya got me. If the Iowa Chop is indeed a 'new cut of pork,' where's it been all these years? How was it discovered?" He concluded that while the Iowa Chop had its merits, it was not worth the publicity it had received. See Josef Mossman, "Iowa Chop 'looked, tasted good,'" *Des Moines Register* (6 March 1977).

Scheffler believed this to be a prime example of creative advertising and marketing, and wrote that this type of advertising would “create a little interest at very little expense.” Porkette groups in other counties had also given Iowa Chops as gifts to “urban friends, ministers, and others,” while several groups were planning to give Iowa Chops to the family of the first baby born in 1977 in the hospitals in their county. The gift would equal the newborn’s weight, and would be the ideal promotion because “usually the newspapers enjoy an interesting story of this sort and will often feature pictures with the article.” Still, Scheffler found it necessary to once again encourage women to approach restaurant managers. She wrote, “Are you a little hesitant about approaching restaurants? Please don’t be.” Scheffler found that the Iowa Chop would “sell itself,” and the women should not “be discouraged if it takes a month or two to get the IOWA CHOP fully established in a restaurant. Persistence and determination do pay!”<sup>347</sup>

During the first months of 1977, Scheffler received more and more ideas from Porkettes across the state. Their reports of promotional activities revealed that many of these groups sought new ways to increase not only their visibility, but also their professional appearance. In April 1977, Scheffler sent out another report to the county presidents in which she once again advised women to be persistent in their work with restaurants. She suggested that the women make an “Iowa Chop Show-Book,” or a marketing kit with featuring extensive information and samples of printed materials. Using a simply three-ring binder, the Porkettes could easily and professionally display the menu clip-ons, recipe cards, yellow brochures, ad slicks, newspaper advertisements, publicity stories, pictures of the Iowa Chop, meat identification labels, Iowa Chop buttons, a list of restaurants in their area serving the

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<sup>347</sup> Judy Scheffler to County Porkette Presidents (November 1977), IPR.

Iowa Chop, and the Iowa Chop preparation techniques of the four test restaurants. Scheffler found that restaurant managers often responded best when presented with concrete information, and wrote, “It’s been proven to be simple, but highly effective.”<sup>348</sup>

Between March and December 1977 the Iowa Porkettes spent \$3,199.30 on the Iowa Chop campaign, including advertising, buttons, recipe cards, labels, telephone calls. Yet this amount did not include expenses for local and county chapters, or travel and personal expenses for the volunteers. Nonetheless, by the end of 1977, their efforts resulted in 160 Iowa restaurants featuring the “Iowa Chop,” on their menus, and meat counters across the state reported increased consumer demand for that particular cut. Due to the initial success of the Porkettes, and the desire on the part of IPPA leaders to further expand promotional efforts, the Pork in Education Committee became a joint committee, which included members from both the Porkettes and the IPPA. When the Pork in Education Committee became a joint committee with the IPPA, the Porkettes reported that this was “a totally new experience for us.” But they also found new opportunities to expand their programs and include such materials as “radio tapes, crock pot low-energy cookbook, hog by-product slide presentations, education packets, and ‘pilot’ school presentations. They also developed a film

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<sup>348</sup> Even if they were successful in persuading restaurants to adopt the Iowa Chop, Scheffler still encouraged the Porkettes to maintain a good professional relationship with restaurant owners in their area. She wrote, “Continue to check and double-check the Iowa Chop in previously established Iowa Restaurants. Are they serving the actual Iowa Chop? Are they advertising the Iowa Chop? Is the size and weight appropriate to the Iowa Chop? Are you giving our praise and encouragement to Iowa Chop restaurants? Why not hold a Pork Producers or Porkettes meeting in the restaurant and order Iowa Chops off the menu?”

Judy Scheffler to County Porkette Presidents (22 April 1977), IPR.

Though the Iowa Porkettes provided printed materials to county organizations, Scheffler consistently encouraged women at the local levels to be creative in their approach to promotions. In October 1978, she wrote, “October Iowa Chop Promotions need not cost a lot of money or time – just a little imagination and planning.” After listing several ideas of local promotions, she concluded, “These are just a few ideas to start you off thinking about your own new and better Iowa Chop ideas. Choose the ideas that will best suit your own situation. Let your imagination run wild with Iowa Chop ideas – just remember to get good publicity on the ideas.” See Judy Scheffler to County Porkette Presidents (October 1978), IPR.

entitled, “The Endless Varieties of Pork,” which focused on the “Iowa Chop,” but also dealt with varieties of pork and retail costs, and could be distributed to home economics teachers, retailers, Extension personnel, and marketers.<sup>349</sup>

The popularity of the “Iowa Chop” campaign required state leaders to keep more detailed, standardized records, especially as they provided greater support for Porkette activities at the local levels. In 1978 significant growth occurred in a budget category titled “Special Projects, etc.” which referred to money going to district and county organizations for local promotions, indicating that the state organization could finally assist in funding local promotions. In 1977, the budget for “Special Projects” stood at \$1,032.37, but in 1978, this grew to \$6,951.24. These funds allowed local Porkettes to purchase greater quantities of food for demonstrations, to advertise events, and to purchase or make promotional leaflets. The growing budget, as well as their incorporated status, also demanded that the Porkettes keep more detailed, standardized records, which further added to their desire for a more professional image.<sup>350</sup>

As membership grew and financial resources became more abundant, many members gained the confidence to attempt even more public events, though these years marked another turning point when many state leaders began to understand the necessity of professional presentation and appearance. In March and April 1977, at the height of the Iowa Chop

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<sup>349</sup> *The Iowa Porkettes Twenty-Eight Year History: January 1964-January 1992* (1992), 4, IPR; “Pork Education Committee Report,” *Iowa Pork Producer* (August 1978), 23; Joyce Hoppes, “Pork and the Consumer,” in Muhm, *Iowa Pork and People*, 159-161; “Iowa Check-off Success Stories,” [http://www.iowapork.org/pork\\_checkoff/consumer/iowachop.html](http://www.iowapork.org/pork_checkoff/consumer/iowachop.html), INTERNET, accessed 12 July 2007.

The Iowa Chop promotions continued throughout 1978, with several major restaurant chains, including Marriott, Holiday, and Sheraton placing the Iowa Chop on their affiliated restaurant menus. One major highlight of the campaign that year was the inclusion of the Iowa Chop on the menu of the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington, D.C. See Judy Scheffler to County Porkette Presidents, (October 1978), IPR.

<sup>350</sup> “Iowa Porkettes Financial Statement,” (31 December 1977), IPR; “Iowa Porkettes Financial Statement,” (31 December 1978), IPR.

campaign, several members of the Porkettes participated in the “Spring Thing,” a promotional activity coordinated by the Iowa Cowbells, a similar organization dedicated to promoting beef. Paid for with funds from the “Special Projects” category of the budget, the “Spring Thing” was designed to include county and district leaders across the state. The event also included representatives from the Iowa Dairy Council, the Farm Bureau, the Iowa Egg Council, and featured presentations on cooking, nutrition, and food safety for consumers at eight different locations across the state. The presentations took place at community colleges and county fairgrounds, while planners anticipated an audience of home economics instructors, Extension home economists, 4-H leaders, and farm and urban women interested in learning more about various food products. The event was open to the general public, and the rural women were especially encouraged to “bring a city friend.” The eight Porkettes who volunteered to speak decided on a presentation entitled, “Meats on Your Menu,” in which they would barbeque an Iowa Chop and make several hors d’oeuvres. They also planned to set up booths with leaflets and pigskin products. This appeared comparable to the other presentations, which included “Crack Eggs Style,” by a female representative from the Iowa Egg Council, “Label it Nutrition,” a talk about reading food labels by a female representative from the Dairy Council, Inc., and “Dairy Products... Do You Know Them?” by a female representative from the Midland United Dairy Association.

During March and April, 1977, “Spring Thing” activities took place throughout the state, in the cities of Monticello, Mason City, Iowa City, Atlantic, Fort Dodge, Creston, Newton, and Spencer. However, President Karen McCreedy received little positive feedback when she asked participating members for their evaluations of the events. While some presenters reported that they learned a great deal, enjoyed working with women from other

commodities, and felt good about reaching home economics instructors, most of the presenters were disappointed in both their performance and their inability to reach bigger crowds. Joy Reynolds, a Porkette from Milo, Iowa, who gave the presentation in Creston, was pleased with the fact the county Pork Queen agreed to participate, and she was “the only queen to appear.” At the same time however, Reynolds felt inadequate and amateur compared to the other presenters. She wrote that she was the only demonstrator who was “not a professional,” and though the audience seemed to respond to her, she did not feel “as fluid and at ease as those who have given [presentations] several times.” Likewise, Genny Boyd of Charles City, who gave the presentation in Mason City, wrote to McCreedy that she “felt very inadequate in the pork presentation as all the other demonstrations were done by professional people.”<sup>351</sup>

These inadequacies were not simply a figment of the women’s imaginations. Kay Schueneman of Spencer, wrote that the county Cowbelle president went to another “Spring Thing” that took place a few weeks before the event in Spencer. The Cowbelle reported to Schueneman that the Porkette presentation at this event was “very poor” compared to the rest of the program. Schueneman, apparently frustrated by the Cowbelle’s review, then complained to McCreedy, “This is a problem because you’re putting us up next to pros who are before the public all the time.” To correct the situation, Schueneman recommended a standard script for all Porkettes, or even a “state paid fulltime Porkette. But,” she added, “of course that’s a dream.” Schueneman did not suffer from this problem of stage fright, however, because she had experience as a public speaker. In her presentation she used a skit

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<sup>351</sup> Barbara Gordon to Porkette Officers, 18 February 1977, IPR; “Tentative Plans for Cowbelle ‘Spring Thing,’” undated memorandum, IPR; “Evaluation comments on the Spring Thing,” undated memorandum, IPR; Joy Reynolds to Karen McCreedy, 16 April 1977; Genny Boyd to Karen McCreedy, 15 March 1977, IPR.



entitled, “Mrs. Brown and Penelope Pig,” which “made the ladies laugh.” Yet even when the women believed they successfully reached the audience, they did not believe the “Spring Thing” attracted the correct audience. Susan Weitzel, of the Humboldt County Porkettes, wrote to McCreedy that while the “Spring Thing” was fun, most of those in attendance were actually participants. She concluded that the activity should be held in a more public space. “We feel we are not reaching the right people with a meeting of this sort,” Weitzel wrote. “Is it possible to hold meetings of this type in large shopping center malls?”<sup>352</sup>

While this event alone did not necessarily result in drastic changes, reactions to the “Spring Thing” represented an overall feeling among members, particularly state leaders, that the Porkettes needed to truly reform their image by engaging in more professional activities. At the annual meeting state leaders appeared to follow up with Weitzel’s suggestion by forming a new Metropolitan Committee specifically devoted to sponsoring promotions in Iowa’s largest cities. Then, when the Long Range Planning Committee met in September 1978, members suggested expanding the Pork in Education programs beyond high schools to adult education, particularly at community colleges, as well as to children in elementary schools. They urged the creation of a new program targeting older people by contacting dieticians who worked in nursing homes. The committee also believed the Porkettes should hold a leadership conference specifically for women. Throughout their report on the seventeen Porkette committees and programs, the Long Range Planning Committee repeatedly made references to improving activities and making them more authoritative. For example, members of the committee “*strongly* recommended” that the Porkettes hire a home

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<sup>352</sup> Kay Schueneman to Karen McCreedy, 8 June 1977; Susan Weitzel of the Humboldt County Porkettes to Karen McCreedy, May 4, 1977, IPR.

economist. The report stated that a home economist could work with radio and television programs and was a “read need here, especially when we work with other commodity groups who have one.” In new programs geared toward medical workers, they wrote that all materials should be “professionally done” to lend credibility, and information should “a voice of authority” from an expert at the Meat Lab at Iowa State University.<sup>353</sup>

These suggestions accompanied an overall shift in attitudes toward women’s roles within the realm of hog farming. Though they still identified themselves as “farm wives,” in 1978, Iowa Porkette President, Madeline Meyer, reminded members just what being a “farm wife” entailed. She wrote, “You handle the bookkeeping and you pay the bills. You prepare the meals, and you play midwife at farrowing time. You’re responsible for watching the kids, you answer the telephone and you keep the house in order. You have all the responsibilities you husband doesn’t, and then some. You’re the wife of an Iowa Pork Producer.” Such rhetoric was more direct in its assertions than that of the mid-1960s, as Meyer assumed that women had greater experience dealing directly with hogs and with the business of the farm.<sup>354</sup>

As they approached the 1980s, members of the Porkettes not only had a strong organizational structure, but they had also transformed the image of the hog farmer’s wife from that of provincial homemaker to a professional producer of agricultural commodities.

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<sup>353</sup> “Long Range Planning Committee Report,” 1978, IPR; *The Iowa Porkettes Twenty-Eight Year History: January 1964-January 1992* (1992), 4, IPR.

The Metropolitan Committee proved to be highly successful and very active. For example, in October 1978, during Pork Month, members of the Metropolitan Committee hosted a promotional at the Crossroads Mall in Waterloo, Iowa. Twelve counties participated, Benton, Black Hawk, Grundy, Tama, Bremer, Butler, Chickasaw, Floyd, Buchanan, Franklin, Fayette, and Marshall Counties. Each county organization provided a formal demonstration to the public with demonstrations ranging from discussions on by-products and nitrites to pigskin crafts and cooking demonstrations. See Madeline Meyer, “Metro Committee Report,” *Iowa Pork Producer* (November 1978), 23.

<sup>354</sup> Madeline Meyer, “Porkettes,” *Iowa Pork Producer* (August 1978), 23.

One major step toward achieving this goal occurred in the summer of 1979, when the Iowa Porkettes hired a home economist. Though Lois Keister joined the Porkettes Staff in June 1979 as a part-time home economist, working just two days a week, President Madeline Meyer encouraged members to take full advantage of Keister's services. These included developing promotions and educational materials, as well as writing a regular column in the *Iowa Pork Producer* about nutrition, cooking, and marketing. The following year, the Porkettes gained administrative support when Deloras Northway joined the IPPA staff as the full-time "Porkette Coordinator." Then, in the spring of 1982, the Porkettes cast off Lady Loinette in favor of a simple, modern logo featuring the letters "IP," to stand for "Iowa Porkettes," prominently centered over a silhouette of the state of Iowa. This signified that they were no longer content to promote pork simply by serving it to city friends during their visits to the farm, but they expected to work with the public, manage a considerable budget, travel, and sponsor elaborate events at supermarkets, fairs, and local occasions. Porkettes also expected to work with professionals in the food industry, educators, food writers and critics, restaurant owners, processors, retailers, advertisers, and even animal rights activists who questioned the safety and happiness of animals living in confinements. In order to do this, members needed precise knowledge of hog rearing, nutrition, marketing, processing, and preparation in order to make a convincing case for pork.<sup>355</sup>

During the early 1980s, members of the Iowa Porkettes Executive Committee asked for an external review in order to assess the current and future direction of the organization, and the final report only reinforced the need to move toward professionalization. The experts

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<sup>355</sup> Madeline Meyer, "Building Our Organizational Skills in 1979," *Iowa Pork Producer* (June 1979), 10; "The Iowa Porkettes," *Iowa Pork Producer* (April 1982), 24.

they consulted included Keith Heffernan, who served as the Executive Director of the Iowa Corn Growers Association and later the Assistant Director of the Center for Agriculture and Rural Development (CARD) at Iowa State University, as well as Lois Keister, former home economist for the Iowa Porkettes, and then of the Iowa Egg Council. Finally, they turned to Russ Sanders, who developed the “Iowa Chop” marketing program while working for the Iowa Development Commission, and who, in 1980, served as Vice President of Marketing for the National Pork Producers Council where he spearheaded the “America, you’re leaning on pork” and “Pork. The Other White Meat” campaigns.

In their organizational review, Heffernan, Keister, and Sanders observed that the Porkettes membership would certainly feel the effects of specialization within agriculture, as “professionalism,” and the need for technical expertise increased. At the same time, as the number of farm families faced a rapid decline, they also encouraged the Porkettes to take on more political issues and to tell “agriculture’s story to the growing segment of the population not familiar with the business.” Heffernan, Keister, and Sanders were optimistic that the Porkettes could achieve this professional status. Because of these trends toward specialization, they predicted that “men will probably expand their emphasis on the production side of the business. On the other hand women may very well become more responsible for staying aware of the external issues impacting agriculture, such as government, activist issues, etc.” Furthermore, they believed that as women’s roles continued to evolve, it was entirely possible that women would become more involved in the farming operation.

Yet this progress was not without a price. The three experts argued that the Porkettes needed to become more “results oriented, rather than activity oriented.” Though the Porkettes

had never truly been an “activity oriented” organization, like an Extension home makers club, this realization marked an important departure from the traditional structures that had characterized rural women’s organizations for generations. The primary purpose of the group would no longer be community, but rather business. And this required centralized leadership, permanent office facilities in which to operate, and better connections with urban communities, processors, retailers, and other professionals. Heffernan, Keister, and Sanders discerned some resistance to complete professionalization, particularly on the part of “older, traditional members.” They suggested that the Porkettes overcome this by adopting a “formal vision statement,” and urged, “If the organization wants to be more professional, then it needs to take a more professional stance when dealing with industry – perhaps utilize better trained individuals.” Furthermore, the Porkettes needed to increase their partnership with the IPPA, and improve their professional image by changing their name or increasing dues. The experts argued that the women held themselves back by refusing to charge higher dues, which could be used to enhance and expand their activities. They wrote, “When \$4 or \$5 is charged for membership, it may well reinforce the idea that that is all the organization is worth.”<sup>356</sup>

The Porkettes adopted several of the suggestions recommended by Heffernan, Keister, and Sanders, and in 1983 they began publication of the “Ladies Pork Journal,” a regular publication that not only kept members up-to-date on activities and promotions, but also included marketing, political, and legislative information pertaining to hogs and pork, as well as “Hints from the Hog House,” where women could share their tips for working with

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<sup>356</sup> Keith Heffernan, Lois Kiester, and Russ Sanders, “Iowa Porkette Organizational Review,” (1983), IPR.

animals and equipment. The proposal that the Porkettes should change their name, however, provoked a heated debate. During the early 1980s, state organizations across the country abandoned the name “Porkettes” in favor of names that evoked fewer laughs. The Michigan Porkettes, for example, became the Michigan Pork Partners. By the spring of 1985, one year after forming a task force to investigate the issue, the National Porkettes voted to change their name to the National Pork Council Women. National President, Carmen Jorgensen, cited the fact that few government officials and those outside the pork industry, would take her seriously. Likewise, National Vice President, Karen McCreedy, who once served as president of the Iowa Porkettes, believed that the new name was a step in the right direction. While the goals of the organization would remain the same, McCreedy believed the new name reflected a more professional image.<sup>357</sup>

Iowa women, however, were not convinced. In January 1984, at the Iowa Pork Congress, the name became a central issue at the Porkettes’ meeting. Member Judy Antone of West Branch, Iowa argued that few people took her seriously when she introduced herself as a Porkette. Instead, Antone preferred to identify herself as a “pork industry representative,” especially in her work as the national director and member of the board of the Pigskin Council of America. In one article, she told Don Muhm, Farm Editor for the *Des Moines Register*, that most people thought the Porkettes was a club for dieters, or even a cute name for a tenderloin sandwich. Antone added, “We’re just not presenting the kind of image of professional farm women and of pork products.” Ultimately, the Porkettes voted to retain the name, as most members agreed with one-time president Kathryn Loudon who said,

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<sup>357</sup> “New Pork Cook-off Announced for 1985; Iowa Porkettes Involved in APC Activities,” *Iowa Pork Producer* (May 1984), 18; “Iowans Attend National Meeting; Name Change, APC Plans Discussed,” *Iowa Pork Producer* (November 1984); “Ladies Pork Journal,” 5, no. 1 (Spring 1985), IPR.

“People know who we are – people in the Legislature, in Des Moines, Washington. Besides, there’s no satisfactory name... We’ve been known for 20 years as Porkettes, and have that on our letterheads and all. It would cost a lot to change now.” Likewise, the newly elected president JoAnn Brincks of Carroll, Iowa, believed that the name Porkettes was distinct and memorable, and it implied that women were “pork partners” with their husbands on the farm.<sup>358</sup>

With the name secure, the Porkettes adopted several other suggestions from the report compiled by Heffernan, Keister, and Sanders: to work more closely with the IPPA and industry professionals, and to raise more money. In October 1984, member Mary Irene McDonald of Muscatine, Iowa, announced the formation for the Finance and Revenue Development Committee. In a formal letter to all members, McDonald, chair of the new committee, wrote, “As organizations grow and become more complex, methods do change. The Iowa Porkettes are in this process of change and we now have a new committee, the Finance and Revenue Development Committee to handle all matters of contributions in the future.” The exact function of the committee was “to seek increased contributions and new contributors,” who could finance Queen contests, the “Ladies Pork Journal,” and new projects members wanted to undertake.

At one of their first meetings, in November 1984, committee members set lofty fundraising goals, and decided to solicit donations from major companies such as Purina, Calmut, Elanco, Oscar Meyer, Pioneer, and Farmland Industries. They hoped they donations could entirely finance the 1985 Pork Queen Contest and the Ladies’ Pork Journal. Far from

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<sup>358</sup> Don Muhm, “‘Porkette’ Critics Lose Fight for New Name,” *Des Moines Register* (27 January 1984), IPR.

simple fundraisers, members of the Finance and Revenue Committee solicited donations by portraying the Porkettes as a professional organization working to support the pork industry. One 1985 brochure entitle, “Join the Pork Team,” assured donors that “YES, the Iowa Porkettes have a job... a necessary job,” and described the group as an “important arm of the Iowa Pork Producers Association.” The brochure described the various Porkette activities, including promotions, queen contests, educational events, and political activities, and justifying these as an integral part of the industry. Donors could rest assured that when they gave money to the Iowa Porkettes they were “teaming up with others in the industry to make things happen for pork.”<sup>359</sup>

In their first year, members of the Finance and Revenue Committee set their fundraising goal at \$3,000, and developed a simple strategy: send out letters to prospective donors, then follow up with personal visits. By March 1985, McDonald reported that the committee had received money from thirty-five companies and had exceeded its goal by raising \$4,000. They were able to maintain this momentum, and by December 1986 the committee reported donations for the year totaling \$4,200. This strategy proved effective, with many donors lauding the efforts of the Porkettes. For example, in June 1986 when Triple “F” Products of Des Moines donated \$50, the Director of Swine Products, Colin Kierkegaard wrote, “We feel you have an excellent message to bring to the consumer and we applaud your efforts.” Likewise, when Pioneer Hi-Bred International committed \$200, Public Relations Manager Dave Knau wrote to Porkette President Margaret Ledger, “Your program

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<sup>359</sup> The Porkettes had a Finance and Revenue Committee prior to 1984, but this was a group primarily responsible for managing the budget, disbursements, and donations. After November 1984, the Finance and Revenue Committee was entirely devoted to fundraising and working with corporate sponsors.

Mary Irene McDonald to the membership of the Iowa Porkettes (October 1984), IPR; “Iowa Porkettes Treasurer’s Report,” (31 December 1985), IPR; Brochure, “Join the Pork Team,” (1985), IPR.



activities appear to be well aimed at education and good promotion for the pork industries.”<sup>360</sup>

Funds generated by the Finance and Revenue Committee became the second highest source of income after membership dues, which by this time reached \$29,177. Overall, in 1986, the Iowa Porkettes worked with a total budget of nearly \$32,000, and the numbers were still on the rise. Between October 1987 and September 1988, the Finance and Revenue Committee raised \$6,106, more than twice their annual goal.<sup>361</sup>

This dramatic increase in funds did not necessarily enhance Porkette activities or the group’s standing with the IPPA because as the decade wore on, the IPPA and the National Pork Producers Council (NPPC) increasingly relied on nationwide campaigns devised by marketing professionals, and less on volunteer labor. The Porkettes did not necessarily resist this movement, however, because in many ways they also benefited from the change. Their activities often received more funding, while they increasingly served on joint committees with the men of the IPPA.

Beginning in the early 1980s, the NPPC launched advertising campaigns, including “America, you’re leaning on pork,” which emphasized pork as a healthy, low-fat option. For these campaigns the NPPC utilized experts in the fields of marketing and promotion, and they turned to media outlets such as radio, television, and print advertising. As a result, the

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<sup>360</sup> “1984 Porkettes Committee Reports,” *Iowa Pork Producer* (March 1985), 25; Colin Kierkegaard to Margaret Ledger, 3 June 1986, IPR; Dave Knau to Margaret Ledger, 12 June 1986, IPR. Members of the Finance and Revenue Committee also sought the advice of IPPA Executive Vice President Mike Telford. At a meeting in April 1985, Telford discussed strategies, tax policies for donations, and the importance of being specific with donating companies. Telford advised the committee to “develop a list of definite projects and have it big enough to include several areas. Different companies will pick up on different interests.” He also encouraged the women not to underestimate the importance of their work. The meeting minutes noted that, “a common mistake is not to ask for enough money.” See Finance and Revenue Development Committee Meeting Minutes (10 April 1985), IPR.

<sup>361</sup> “Iowa Porkettes Treasurer’s Report,” (31 December 1986), IPR; “Iowa Porkettes Financial Report,” (30 September 1988), IPR.

NPPC relied less on the volunteer services of the National Pork Council Women, or the state Porkette groups. Though women's activities had provided a low-cost option for marketing, in 1985 new, mandatory check-off legislation provided a more consistent, and significantly greater means of funding for advertising, promotion, and research. For more than two decades, voluntary check-off funds, or small market deductions taken at the time of sale, provided modest operating budgets for organizations like the IPPA or the NPCC. The voluntary deductions ranged from five to twenty cents per head of hog or pig sold, and funded approximately one third of the IPPA's annual expenses.

On 28 May 1985, however, Iowa Governor Terry Branstad signed the state's first mandatory check-off law, which required farmers to deduct .0025 percent of the value of all hogs and pigs sold, or approximately 25 cents per \$100. IPPA leaders saw this as a major legislative victory because in 1984, under the voluntary program, with only about 57 percent of Iowa hog farmers participating, check-off funds totaled \$2.6 million. The IPPA retained only \$395,000, only one-quarter of their \$1.2 million annual operating budget. The remainder of these funds was divided between the National Livestock and Meat Board and the National Pork Producers Council. With the new legislation in 1985, however, leaders expected 95 percent of hog farmers to participate, raising a record \$5.9 million. Of this amount, IPPA Executive Vice President Mike Telford estimated that the IPPA would retain approximately \$716,478, or more than half of their annual operating budget. The IPPA would further benefit from the new check-off legislation because it required the creation of the Iowa Pork Producers Council (IPPC) to oversee another \$1.6 million in check-off funds. The IPPC

funds were specifically targeted at promotions, research, and advertising, and would underwrite many of the IPPA and Porkette activities.<sup>362</sup>

IPPA members greeted the new legislation with great enthusiasm, and in a survey of 820 members, 65 percent listed increasing national advertising campaigns, especially in major cities, as the most important priority. After this, members favored new product development, creating consumer nutrition information labels, educational programs for homemakers, and export market development. IPPA President Bill Riggan looked forward to expanding marketing programs and funding research in the development of pork products. He also thanked the members of the Porkettes for their work in lobbying state legislators, and for their efforts to promote pork. Their success in securing check-off funds, Riggan believed, was a result of pork producers and Porkettes working together on an issue “so important to the pork industry.” For the Porkettes, this was their first major political activity, and Porkette President Jo Ann Brincks commended the members for their efforts. “We are a grass roots organization,” she wrote, “And because of your help our grass roots people are happy with our move.” Member Donna Keppy, who served on the IPPA legislative committee, believed that the Porkettes had proven their worth. She further encouraged women to become more involved by forming joint legislative committees at the district and county levels that included members of both the IPPA and the Porkettes.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Though the IPPA ultimately reaped the benefit of the money, the legislation stipulated that a new Iowa Pork Producers Council (IPPC) be formed to oversee and administer the check-off funds. The IPPC Council worked closely with the IPPA, however, and often utilized IPPA staff.

“Mandatory Checkoff Set,” *Iowa Pork Producer* (June 1985), 5; “Governor Signs History-Making Checkoff Law,” *Iowa Pork Producer* (July 1985), 6-7; “Finance Committee Meeting Minutes,” IPPA (20 September 1985), IPR.

<sup>363</sup> “Clear Guidelines to IPPC on Promotion, Marketing,” *Iowa Pork Producer* (October 1985), 4; “President Brincks Thanks Iowa Porkettes; Grassroots Efforts Pay Off,” *Iowa Pork Producer* (July 1985), 19.

Over the next three years, members of the Porkettes and the IPPA progressively formed more and more joint committees to handle Pork in Education, planning, membership, promotions, and legislation. In 1986, seventeen of thirty-one IPPA committees included women, and in 1990 eighteen of thirty-two IPPA committees included women. Though they were in the minority, women nonetheless comprised 84 of the 274 total members serving on IPPA committees. As early as 1986, members of the Porkette Long Range Planning Committee had viewed this as a positive development, and encouraged more women to become part of joint committees not only at the state level, but also at the district and county levels. This would further enable them to pursue a more “Professional Plan of Work,” and to keep membership strong. Women at the state, district, and county levels increasingly became involved with committees that included men, and they began planning more activities as joint ventures. This trend was further reflected in the IPPA awards for “Master Pork Producers,” which formerly only went to men. By the end of mid-1980s, the awards began recognizing husbands and wives as partners, as well as entire families who raised hogs.<sup>364</sup>

In February 1988, former President Margaret Ledger believed this trend to be a move in the right direction. Joint committees, she wrote, were “an asset to both Pork Producers and Porkette organizations.” Unlike her predecessors, Ledger did not even refer to gender when she wrote, “This group [the Porkettes] has many well-qualified, forward thinking members who are working on a large variety of committees, all of which are working for the common goal. Through their continued efforts, I’m excited about the future of the pork industry.” The future of Pork promotion, however, did not appear to include the Porkettes as an independent

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<sup>364</sup> “1986 IPPA Committees,” IPR; “Pork Committee Structure, 1990-1991,” IPR; “Iowa Porkettes Long Range Planning Suggestions For 1986,” (1986), IPR.

organization. In January 1987, leaders in both organizations formed a joint Pork Producer/Porkette Planning Committee to determine “whether the two organizations should be working to be one.” They cited declining numbers of families raising hogs and problems finding good leadership, and believed that merging the organization would “make it more economical” to function as a group. A 1986 survey of the Iowa Porkettes revealed that many women favored this move, with more than 2/3 of respondents favoring a merger with the IPPA. Yet in August 1987, when one member of the committee moved that there be a vote to merge at the January 1988 Iowa Pork Congress, that motion was defeated. First, several members of the committee wanted to survey local leaders.<sup>365</sup>

During the summer of 1987, a survey of eleven district IPPA officers and thirteen district Porkette officers revealed that while more than half (fifteen out of twenty-four respondents) favored a merger, many were hesitant to move too quickly. When asked to list the disadvantages of having just one organization, several respondents expressed concern for the women’s programs. One respondent wrote, “Women would be losing their identity as Porkettes,” while another remarked, “Men aren’t always interested in Porkette issues and vice versa – attitudes would have to change on both side before it will work.” Overall, many of the respondents appeared to believe that women comprised a significant number of the “grassroots” members, and that to lose the Porkettes would mean alienating local organizations. Another respondent cited a case where a local group decided to merge and the board retained one woman as a “token” member. “The lone woman has lost much of her network,” the respondent claimed, “She is trying to carry on Porkette programs – but is

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<sup>365</sup> “Pork Producer / Porkette Planning Committee” IPPA Office, Clive, IA (13 January 1987), IPR; “Pork Producer / Porkette Planning Committee” IPPA Office, Clive, IA (14 August 1987), IPR; “Pork Producer / Porkette Planning Committee” IPPA Office, Clive, IA (5 November 1987), IPR.

getting very discouraged.” Several of the respondents also objected because they feared men would not welcome women into the organization and they would not support the initiatives valued by women. One respondent feared that women might drop out because men would not want to be involved with promotions. She wrote, “Men will be running everything just because they are men. There are programs women just run better and they should be given the chance. I can’t see any board men from our county giving a home ec demo [sic] or assisting ladies clubs as some Porkettes do.”<sup>366</sup>

On the other hand, when asked to list the advantages of a merger, several of those surveyed looked forward to integrating the Porkettes into the IPPA and gaining new insights into promotion and fundraising. They believed that by consolidating the two organizations, both would save money and time, and enjoy better communication. Furthermore, the merger would best serve the industry as a whole as men and women worked toward the same goals. One respondent believed the merger would provide women with more funding to carry out their promotions, while another thought it would bring “Total organizational continuity,” and would allow the “best qualified persons to serve on board regardless of sex.”<sup>367</sup>

Just over a year later, at the 1989 Iowa Pork Congress, state Porkette leaders appointed another joint committee to study the feasibility of maintaining a women’s organization when so much of their work appeared to overlap with that of the IPPA. Furthermore, the need for volunteer labor in marketing and promotion was surpassed by the availability of funds and the ability to utilize professional marketing services. Finally, the poor economic conditions of the 1980s made finding and retaining members more difficult.

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<sup>366</sup> “Board of Directors Survey,” Porkette/Pork Producers Planning Committee, 1989, IPR.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

After nearly two decades of growth, membership began a steady decline from an all-time high of 8366 in 1985, to 6556 in 1989. Overall, the number of farms producing hogs and pigs in Iowa also declined from 49,012 in 1981, to 38,368 in 1987, a loss of more than 10,000 hog farms. The trend did not appear to be slowing down, or even leveling off, and by 1992, only 34, 058 Iowa farms raised hogs or pigs. In 1997, this number had fallen to just 18,370. Even if farm families managed to weather the crisis, many women took jobs off the farm in order to supplement the farm income and no longer had the time to devote to volunteer activities.<sup>368</sup>

In November 1989, after ten months of study, Porkettes Vice President Helen Pollock wrote an article in the *Iowa Pork Producer* in which she urged members to seriously consider a merger with the IPPA. She cited economic conditions as the primary reason, and the fact that fewer and fewer women were available to volunteer. She wrote, “Many of the county groups are struggling to survive because not enough women are available to do the promotions. The women are employed or have too many other demands on their time and less time to commit to the Porkettes.” Simply put, “There just are not enough people for all the slots.” The second reason Pollock favored a merger was the fact that the IPPA board already oversaw the administration of check-off funds to be used for promotion and education. These, she believed, were “traditional women’s issues,” but that “the lines

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<sup>368</sup> It is important to note that while the number of farms producing hogs and pigs declined, the number of hogs and pigs produced did not. In fact, the number of hogs and pigs produced in Iowa increased significantly, from 23.8 million in 1981, to 26.8 million in 1992.

Margaret Ledger, “... When You’re Having Fun,” *Iowa Pork Producer* (February 1988), 6; *The Iowa Porkettes Twenty-Eight Year History: January 1964-January 1992* (1992), 7, IPR; Margaret Hanson, et al., *Agriculture in Iowa: Trends from 1935 to 1997*, (Ames: Census Services, Department of Sociology, Iowa State University, November 1999), 143.

between the two groups' areas of responsibility are dimming." The mere existence of so many joint committees proved that "there is no longer a need for two separate groups."<sup>369</sup>

Pollock proposed a unification plan that would create a single board of directors, made up of men and women, to oversee the IPPA, as well as a continuation of the joint committee system. She did not believe that a merger would hinder opportunities for women to become involved, and wrote, "Are women going to be lost in the shuffle? I think not! We are too strong for that. We have too many good ideas that are needed by our industry. We have women who will be involved." Citing the Porkettes' twenty-five year history, and their growth as an organization into a "proud, active group of farm women," she believed the merger plan was an inevitable development, necessary if the IPPA were to survive the economic crisis and the uncertain decades ahead.<sup>370</sup>

In January 1990, just two months after Pollock proposed the merger plan in the *Iowa Pork Producer* article, IPPA members passed the resolution at an IPPA delegate session during the Iowa Pork Congress. When put before the Porkette delegates at their annual meeting, however, the plan failed by one vote. Yet the Porkettes also elected Helen Pollock as President, knowing that she favored dissolution of the organization. Over the next year, as membership fell by 22 percent and the income from membership dues also declined, state Porkette leaders questioned whether the organization could remain solvent. In February 1990, the Iowa Porkettes withdrew its financial support of the Iowa Pigskin Sales Company, and in September the company was sold to private individuals who renamed the business "Iowa Pigskin Expressions." As this unfolded, talk of a merger with the IPPA surfaced again

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<sup>369</sup> Helen Pollock, "Facing up to Change," *Iowa Pork Producer* (November 1989), 4.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid.



at the Iowa Pork Congress in January 1991. Once more, the Porkettes voted down the merger by a narrow margin. Yet more and more members came to believe that dissolving the Porkettes was inevitable. Kathryn Loudon, who had been involved since its beginning in 1964, recalled that the merger was not really a surprise, but rather part of the Porkettes' evolution as an organization. She said, "You knew it was coming. We knew that we were going to merge with the men, and we voted it down a time or two, even though it didn't get the majority vote the first two times. It wasn't really a surprise, it just happened." And it happened, she said, without any animosity because the reality of the Porkettes' precarious financial situation began to sink in.<sup>371</sup>

In May 1991, just five months after the second vote, President Helen Pollock sent what she believed to be "the most important letter I have written as your president," to all county, district, and state officers. The letter stated that at a recent meeting of the IPPA Board of Directors, a motion passed requiring the Porkettes to pay half of the actual organizational costs in 1992, and the full amount in 1993. Up to this time, the IPPA had provided office space, staff time, equipment, and insurance. Though promotional activities in education, consumer information, restaurants, and queen contests would still be financed with check-off funds, the new resolution required that day-to-day operating expenses be shouldered by the Porkettes. At that moment, the Porkettes had approximately \$70,000 in their treasury, and operated on a estimated annual budget of \$32,000. In order to adequately finance the Porkettes, they would need to raise dues to \$15 and maintain a membership of at least 5,000. Pollock was not optimistic that this was a feasible option. She did not believe

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<sup>371</sup> *The Iowa Porkettes Twenty-Eight Year History: January 1964-January 1992* (1992), 7, IPR; Loudon Interview, IPR.

women would continue to join if they raised dues, and as membership had dropped to 5,444 from 6,818 in 1990, she was not entirely sure that they could maintain their numbers. Pollock urged the women to reconsider the merger issue and asked, “Is the Iowa Porkette Organization important enough to justify \$32,000 annually?”<sup>372</sup>

By then, only thirty-one of ninety-nine counties even had Porkette organizations, while forty had both men and women serving on joint boards, and several were without formal organizations. Overall, women comprised 29 percent of the board members serving on IPPA committees. And by then, the Porkettes only had five committees entirely run and financed by women. These included: the Budget Committee, which covered long-range planning, and finance and revenue, as well as Credentials, By-Laws, County Project Books, and the Cook Book Committee. All other matters, including promotion and education, were handled in joint committees.<sup>373</sup>

Pollock hoped that the letter would change the minds of those still opposed to a merger. In September 1991, when she called for a special meeting of the Porkette State Board, district leaders, and county delegates in Ames, they finally agreed that women would better serve the pork industry as part of the IPPA. At their September meeting, delegates and officers discussed whether they should spend the money in the treasury, or simply give it to the IPPA, they discussed those programs they wanted to see retained, including the queen contests, the State Fair Committee, the Belle Ringer Award given annually to women for outstanding service to the pork industry. They wondered, did they need to actually sell hogs in their own name in order to be members of the IPPA, as stipulated by the IPPA bylaws?

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<sup>372</sup> Helen Pollock to Porkette County Officers, Porkette District Officers, and Iowa Porkette Board of Directors (30 May 1991), IPR

<sup>373</sup> Ibid.; “Iowa Porkette Special Delegate Session, Starlite Village, Ames, Iowa, Tentative Agenda,” 25 September 1991, IPR.

Did they need to pay the \$10 dues to the IPPA in order be voting members? Should women serve as token members of joint committees, or should they be elected on their merit? What would they do with the thousands of cookbooks, and other promotional materials, printed with their logo? Few questions were answered at that meeting, but in January 1992, at the Iowa Pork Congress, members of the IPPA officially adopted a resolution to merge with the Iowa Porkettes. The resolution allowed the “spouse of an Iowa Pork Producer” to be a voting member, as long as they sold at least two hogs in their name each year. The resolution provided for committees to oversee the mergers of the state, district, and county organizations, but did not necessarily guarantee places on county and district boards for former Porkettes after a the transition period of three years.<sup>374</sup>

Following the January 1992 meeting in which the IPPA delegates accepted the merger resolution, the Porkettes sponsored a program entitled, “This is Your Life, Iowa Porkettes!” They honored all former state officers, then served cake and punch in order to allow “everyone time to visit with old friends and make new ones.” The following evening, at the Pork Queen’s Banquet, the Porkettes sponsored another “Tribute to the Iowa Porkettes,” in which they celebrated their history and gave thanks to all past and current

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<sup>374</sup> “Meeting Minutes,” Iowa Porkette Board, Ames, IA (25 September 1991), IPR; “Merger Resolution,” January 1992, IPR; *The Iowa Porkettes Twenty-Eight Year History: January 1964-January 1992* (1992), 7.

Iowa was not the only state grappling with this issue. In October 1991, one months after the Porkette meeting in Ames, the NPPC and the NPCW also merged and urged other state organizations to follow suit. A memorandum from the NPPC and the NPCW informed members that joint organizations would “facilitate greater involvement of more talented people in NPPC, effectively utilizing our resources in new ways... We see this as a win-win situation.” Ultimately, the NPPC believed that basing organizational membership on one’s gender was “inconsistent with long term trends in society.” And they believed the merger would be a great advantage to women facing “second class status” in the pork industry.” As part of their transition, they reserved temporary officer and leadership positions for three years following the merger, but did not guarantee these seats after that time. The also created the position of an ex-officio, non-voting woman advisor to the Pork Industry Nominating committee, to ensure that qualified women would be nominated for offices and leadership positions. See “Memorandum from John Hardin and Lorraine Harness to NPPC Board of Directors, NPPC State Presidents, National Pork Board, State Executive and Contacts, and NPCW State Presidents,” 18 October 1991, IPR.

members. Yet as they looked back, few members had any regrets, and most looked forward to new opportunities working with the IPPA. Karen McCreedy, who served as State President in 1976 and 1977, then served as National President from 1986 to 1988, believed that members of the Porkettes had learned much over their twenty-eight year history, and could be credited with uniting the various interests within the pork industry, including farmers, processors, retailers, and consumers. More importantly, by participating in the Porkettes, McCreedy believed that farm women gained a new confidence. As they learned about setting goals and long-range planning, they developed practical skills to be applied at home, on the farm, and in various professions. Likewise, Kathryn Loudon wrote,

Even as we have since closed the books on the Iowa Porkettes chapter, the fringe benefits persevere. I feel we did make a big impact on the history of Iowa Pork. And in the process we matured into women capable of accomplishing much in our own lives as well as to the point where we have grown more confident about meeting whatever challenges might come along in the future.

Through many members expressed concern for the future of women within the IPPA, many more worried for the future of the pork industry as a whole. Overall, they believed that women needed to work in tandem with men in their efforts to promote pork and educate consumers.<sup>375</sup>

When they began as a small women's organization in 1964, the Iowa Porkettes believed they served a distinct purpose, to promote pork to the urban housewife. The farm women who founded the group shared many of the same concerns expressed by urban women, particularly about nutrition, fat content, the safety of meat, and the rising cost of food. Yet as the wives of pork producers, these women were in the unique position of

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<sup>375</sup> "The Final Hours of the Iowa Porkettes," *Iowa Pork Producer* (January 1992), 12; *The Iowa Porkettes Twenty-Eight Year History: January 1964-January 1992* (1992), 7, IPR; Karen McCreedy, "None of Us Live on an Island," in Muhm, *Iowa Pork and People*, 88-89; Kathryn Loudon, "Porkettes... and Opportunity to Serve," in Muhm, *Iowa Pork and People*, 86-88.

knowing and understanding the realities of pork production, and they believed that in order to improve their own quality of life, they needed to contribute in some way to the family enterprise. Though they began with very little financial support from the IPPA, the Porkettes utilized traditional rural strategies of building community and creating strong social networks in order to build membership and create new opportunities for women to participate more fully in the promotion and marketing of pork.

Certainly, it is important to ask whether the Porkettes had any impact on the sale of pork. Did consumers actually respond to their message? The production of hogs and pork products increased during this period, and by the end of the 1980s, pork consumption was also on the rise. While it is difficult to establish a direct link between women's activities and consumer demand, it is certain that the Porkettes demonstrated the importance of public relations and they set precedents for future marketing campaigns. In 1988, the NCCP launched the immensely popular campaign, "Pork. The other white meat," and used many of the proven Porkette strategies. Women had already showed that urban consumers responded best to expertise and professional advice, and urban Americans were willing to listen and would try new pork products when provided with clear information. It was simply a matter of presentation and authority. Above all else, the Porkettes' experience shows that some farm women willingly embraced modern agribusiness. Rather than finding themselves marginalized from production, they adapted to the new demands for marketing and promotion. They viewed modern agricultural techniques, such as using confinement systems and manufactured feed, as the key to prosperity for their families. Porkettes were willing to step out of their homes and neighborhoods to "invade" supermarkets, schools, corporations, institutions, and restaurants all in the name of pork. And along the way, they proved that

women and men could work together not just on the farm, but within an industry as a whole.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> Muhm, *Iowa Pork and People*, 82.

## Chapter 6

### “The Answer to the Auxiliary Syndrome”: Women Involved in Farm Economics (WIFE) and a Separate Strategy for Farm Women, 1976-1985

On the evening of 6 December 1976, just one month following the election of Jimmy Carter to the presidency, nine farm women met at the Fort Sidney Motor Hotel in the small panhandle city of Sidney, Nebraska. These nine women usually met to play bridge, but they noticed that recently their talk often turned from the usual discussion of recipes, grandchildren, and children, to the frustrations and uncertainties of agriculture. The 1970s proved to be unstable years for agriculture, and the women feared the for the future of agriculture, and the grim reality that they may not hand down prosperous farms to their children. So, on 6 December, they decided it was time to take action. By the end of their meeting, the women decided to begin a letter-writing campaign to the president-elect. Because he had been a farmer, the women believed he would be sympathetic to their grievances. They also decided to meet again the following week, and this time publish a short “squib” in the local newspaper opening the meeting to all farm women interested in improving farm prices and writing letters to Jimmy Carter.<sup>377</sup>

When Marilyn “Mickey” Spiker, a member of a bridge club, arrived at the hotel the following week, “it was a zoo.” To her surprise, dozens of cars sat parked outside the hotel and “you couldn’t find a place to park for blocks.” Once she finally worked her way inside, another member of the bridge club “came running up the stairs. She said, ‘My God, Mickey,

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<sup>377</sup> “WIFE will formally organize,” *Sidney Sun-Telegraph* (22 December 1976), in Women in Farm Economics Records, MSS 32, Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln (Hereafter cited as WIFE records, UNL); Marilyn “Mickey” Spiker, oral history, 16 February 1983, Des Moines, IA, in WIFE records, UNL.

where have you been?’ She said, ‘Do you know what we have here?’ Seventy women from three states showed up.” The small “squib” from the local newspaper had made its way into Colorado and Wyoming via the Associated Press and UPI news services. For the women of the bridge club, according to Spiker, it was “Panic City.” They had no agenda for the meeting, no political experience, and no mission aside from the letter writing campaign.<sup>378</sup>

That evening, however, 13 December 1976, those seventy women from three states found they had much in common. As Spiker recalled, “They had the frustrations, and all of this resentment... They were on their feet, they were talking, and it made the meeting easy. We didn’t have agenda one, but boy, we had a meeting.” They chose a name, Women in Farm Economics, or WIFE, they elected officers, established committees to write a constitution and by-laws, and they officially established WIFE as a new organization for women in agriculture. As a variety of commodities were represented, the women adopted the strategy of dividing into commodity study groups to identify the main issues and report back to the main group with resolutions and policy suggestions. Two days later, the membership of WIFE sent a collective letter to President-elect Carter, to declare that the “farm women of Nebraska are very concerned about the farm economy,” and to offer their assistance in

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<sup>378</sup> Spiker oral history, 1983, WIFE Records, UNL.

Though seemingly isolated in relation to the rest of the United States, it is little surprise that so many women were able to go to Sidney for the meeting. Sidney, Nebraska is still one of the largest population centers in the panhandle region and serves much of the surrounding area, including parts of eastern Colorado and eastern Wyoming. The county seat for Cheyenne County, the city also had a long military history. First established during the nineteenth century as a military fort, during the Second World War, it became home to the Sioux Ordinance Depot. In 1980 it had a population of 6,010, and though most residents considered it to be an agricultural town, Sidney had growing business and industrial sectors. By 1985, several companies operated in Sidney, including Cabela’s, Pfizer, Prestolike, Safe Play Manufacturing, Master Trading, Chicken House, Swiss, Eggings, and Glover Group. The city also boasted a modern hospital, two lumber yards, thriving retail stores, twelve restaurants, nine fast-food establishments, three car dealerships, several hotels, a country club, an airport, two rest homes, three major implement dealers, three trucking firms, a fertilizer plant, grain elevators, and ample recreational facilities. See: “Table 1B. Population Change, Nebraska Cities and Towns: 1980, 1990, 2000,” in *Historical Population Reports*, Nebraska State Data Center, Center for Public Affairs Research, (Omaha: University of Nebraska at Omaha, 2005), 11; Audrey J. Buhrdorf, “The History of Sidney,” in *Cheyenne County History*, Audrey J. Buhrdorf, director (Dallas, TX: Curtis Media Corporation, 1987), 200-211.



shaping farm policy in the new administration. The women urged Carter to appoint Robert Bergland as Secretary of Agriculture, to raise loan rates to meet the cost of production, and to target commodity prices at 100 percent parity. They stressed the urgency of the situation, but remained optimistic. If only the new administration would trust their expertise, members of WIFE believed they could work directly with politicians and policy makers to improve the standards of living for all farm families.<sup>379</sup>

Though WIFE was not the first organization created entirely by and for farm women during the 1970s, it was one of many grassroots women's groups to emerge without the assistance or guidance of a predominately male organization. This marked an important change in farm women's organizations because WIFE, and others like it such as United Farm Wives and American Agri-Women, no longer relied on men for financial or logistical support. Furthermore, members of WIFE sought immediate recognition in the male-dominated world of politics and firmly believed they should have direct involvement in the political process. This sense of entitlement grew partly out of a shared agrarian ideal, that as farmers, they served the nation by providing food and fiber. Mickey Spiker recalled that as the women of the bridge club laid their grievances on the table, they also resented the fact that the government did little to help farmers, "the most patriotic, hardworking, honest people in the world." She explained, "My husband and my sons were asked, and willingly served in the military, but they aren't allowed to make a living in the country that they were fighting to protect." The founding members of WIFE believed that because farm families had become a minority among workers U.S., that politicians did not feel compelled to create a fair and equitable agricultural program. Farmers, as producers, had lost their voice amidst the much

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<sup>379</sup> Ibid; WIFE to President-elect Jimmy Carter, 15 December 1976, WIFE Records, UNL.

more vocal calls from consumers for low food prices. This idea was best articulated in a January 1977 letter from WIFE secretary Marian Lenzen to Secretary of Agriculture Robert Bergland. Lenzen wrote, "Farmers and ranchers are being forced into slavery by the non-producing urban consumer simply because they are outnumbered." Lenzen blamed cheap food policies for rural depopulation, which led to crowded cities, "high unemployment, huge welfare rolls, and crime in the streets." She argued that the U.S. would not suffer such problems "if agriculture had been a profitable industry and more people had stayed on the family farm where the work ethic thrives even today."<sup>380</sup>

Like women in homemaker's clubs, commodity groups, and marketing organizations, the members of WIFE also justified their participation in politics by claiming that the wife had an equal stake in the success of the family farm. They shared a positive vision of

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<sup>380</sup> Marilyn Spiker, Oral History; Marian Lenzen to Robert Bergland, 26 January 1977, WIFE Records, UNL.

The 1970s witnessed a significant growth of agricultural organizations specifically for farm women, most of which formed in response to inflation, consumer boycotts, and what they believed to be inequitable political policies. In 1973, for example, a group of farm women in Missouri formed the United Farm Wives as an organization to protest widespread consumer beef boycotts. The following year, the United Farm Wives joined a new organization, American Agri-Women, an umbrella organization designed to unite state farm women's groups and promote cooperation. In 1974, the editors of the *Farm Wife News*, in conjunction with Women for the Survival of Agriculture in Michigan (WSAM), sponsored the first National Farm Women's Forum. Since 1971, members of WSAM had been active lobbyists in Washington, D.C., and had asked the USDA to sponsor a conference for farm women. After receiving a cool reception in Washington, the women of WSAM decided to host their own conference and they sought similar organizations to form a national network of farm women. It was not until November 1974, however, that they secured the financing to host the National Farm Women's Forum. The conference was a resounding success, and delegates voted to create a new coalition known as American Agri-Women. By 1980, the coalition included twenty-one women's organizations located throughout the Midwest and the West. Some of these included the American Hereford Auxillary, Women of National Agricultural Aviation Association, Arizona Agri-Business Womens Association, National Peach Partners, Nebraska Ag Gals, Associated Milk Producers, Washington State Dairy Wives, and other women's groups from California, Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, Wisconsin, and Washington.

The activities of American Agri-Women were very similar to those of WIFE, and included lobbying at the local, state, and national levels, as well as consumer education. At their early meetings, members of WIFE decided to contact the leaders of American Agri-Women and discussed whether or not WIFE should also join. Though they eventually voted against it, the founding members of WIFE certainly looked to the American Agri-Women as an effective example of how to organize.

See "The Voice of the American Agri-Woman," American Agri-Women Annual Report and Directory, 1980, WIFE Records, UNL; WIFE meeting minutes, 8 December 1976, 5 January 1977, WIFE Records, UNL.

American politics and believed that the system could work in their favor. In other words, if women properly educated policymakers on the complexity of agriculture they could formulate favorable legislation. Unlike women in other organizations, however, members of WIFE believed it was women, not men, who needed to take the lead and influence policy. In the early 1980s, when anthropologist Ann Perry-Barnes surveyed members of WIFE, she found that many women joined because their husbands were simply too busy or too discouraged with the business of farming to focus on politics.<sup>381</sup>

Likewise, an early brochure intended to attract members offered women an opportunity to work with other women on issues that mattered most to their families. The brochure stated that WIFE was “a general agricultural organization, representing all commodities. It is not an auxiliary, as many women’s groups are. It is an entity of its own with the ability to set policy and decide what issues it will work on.” WIFE was non-partisan, policy oriented, and most importantly, “positive in nature.” The author of the brochure claimed that members acted in a positive, lady-like, law-abiding manner.” Most striking, however, is the author’s reasoning that women should join because they had more time than their husbands. The brochure read:

Why should women join WIFE? Because agriculture needs good spokespersons. Farm and ranch women are very effective because they are partners in their businesses with their husbands. They know what they are talking about. Because farming and ranching is a family business. You as a wife and partner should be as informed as possible about anything that affects that business. Because you have the time, that often your husband does not have to read and study the issues, write letters, attend the meetings, or help with a promotional event. Because YOU can make a difference.

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<sup>381</sup> Ann Perry-Barnes, “An Exchange Theory Analysis of Satisfaction With Membership in an American Voluntary Organization,” MA Thesis, Colorado State University (1985), 73.

Whereas other organizations encouraged women to “help” the men with membership drives or public relations, this WIFE nearly discounts the husband’s contributions to agricultural politics and sets forth the idea that politics has become the women’s responsibility.<sup>382</sup>

In other instances, there was a greater sense of urgency, as some women found their husbands struggling to cope with economic realities. In her January 1977 letter to Secretary of Agriculture Robert Bergland, WIFE secretary Marian Lenzen wrote that farm women were more and more concerned with the increasing stress on their husbands. She wrote, “Their husbands are frustrated and desperate. I have been told by some that they worry about the mental stability of their husbands. They are afraid they might break, commit suicide.” Lenzen’s arguments portrayed a sense of desperation, though in the same letter she expressed confidence that the situation could change because farm women were willing to act for better conditions. “Farm women are tired of working and contributing to the farm and then the return doesn’t even give the farmer minimum wage for his hours, much less compensate for the labor of other members of the family,” she wrote. “It is not fair and something must be done.” Overall, members of WIFE believed that women, whose work roles in the home and on the farm had shifted dramatically, could easily help the farm by working a few hours per week participating in political activities. And while members of WIFE often lauded their husbands and other men for their hard work and devotion to the farm, they believed that women could be more effective as leaders and as a political group without the guidance of men.<sup>383</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> Brochure, “Introducing WIFE,” undated, WIFE Records, UNL.

<sup>383</sup> Marian Lenzen to Robert Bergland, 26 January 1977, WIFE Records, UNL.

This is not to say that members of WIFE conceptualized themselves as independent from men, or moved within a framework shaped by Second Wave feminism. Most did not, and many made concerted efforts to emphasize the fact that they had no interest in “women’s lib.” They continued to identify themselves as “farm wives” who often deferred to their husbands’ judgment, and who worked for the good of the farm rather than for their own personal gain. At the 1977 national WIFE Conference, for example, national WIFE president Betty Majors excited members with a speech detailing the ways in which they could get involved. Nonetheless, she still characterized farming as a primarily male occupation when she concluded, “We will be the silent majority no longer. Stand tall. When they ask what your husband does for a living, you can say, ‘He feeds America.’” Still, WIFE leaders deliberately designed the organization to be for women only, believing that women would have greater opportunities to speak publicly and attain leadership positions. While separate organizing strategies were not new for rural women, the idea that women could and should come into direct contact with policy makers, lobby on the behalf of agriculture, and guide policy was a very new concept in rural women’s activism. The actual policies, including federal supports to guarantee 100 percent parity, were not novel ideas in the realm of agricultural politics, and WIFE promoted few entirely unique strategies. Yet merely the idea that it should be women, without the backing of men, who would speak to politicians and federal bureaucrats on behalf of all of farm families was unheard of in previous years.<sup>384</sup>

Traditionally, leaders of women’s farm organizations advocated education, particularly encouraging farm wives to understand agricultural politics. Yet members of

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<sup>384</sup> “Hey, President Carter! These Women are M.A.D.!” *Rural Electric Nebraskan* (January 1978), 14-15, in WIFE records, UNL.

WIFE expected to directly apply their knowledge. Again, in her January 1977 letter to Robert Bergland, WIFE secretary Marian Lenzen outlined the organization's agenda. First, they demanded that the federal loan support prices be raised to 100 percent of parity for wheat and 90 percent of parity for corn. She based her argument on the idea that the federal government readily provided for other industries and urban renewal projects. Lenzen wrote, "If the government can afford 2 million dollars in loans in New York City and 250 million in loans to Lockheed and 750 million in loans to General Dynamics, don't tell me it can't afford to give some protection to the farm income." After all, "Inflation hits the farmer just as hard as it does the urban resident."<sup>385</sup>

The founding members of WIFE were clearly in search of an alternative political outlet for women that did not already exist in their area. Though located in Nebraska's panhandle, Cheyenne County and Sidney, the county seat, offered a sweep of agricultural organizations. These included the Farm Bureau, the Farmers Union, and the National Farmers Organization (NFO), as well as commodity specific groups for wheat, cattle, and other products. General farm organizations enjoyed a long history in Cheyenne County. Founded in 1917, the Cheyenne County Farm Bureau initially emphasized educational activities, until it soon "became apparent that if farmers were to have anything to say about the agricultural sector they would have to get involved in the legislative process of the County, State, and National Government." Though Farm Bureau members did not establish a women's committee until 1947, there were some opportunities for women to serve on boards and committees. In 1938, Iva Meier, a farmer's wife and Extension leader, became the first woman elected to serve on the county Board of Directors. Likewise, the Farmer's Union set

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<sup>385</sup> Marian Lenzen to Robert Bergland, 26 January 1977, WIFE Records, UNL.

down roots in 1920, offering cooperatives, grain elevators and storage facilities, educational meetings, political activities, and social opportunities. Though membership numbers declined significantly during the 1970s, in 1986, the Cheyenne County Farmers Union still enjoyed a membership of approximately 300. New farm organizations also found a place in Cheyenne County, when in October 1977, WIFE recognized the growing momentum of the newly created American Agriculture Movement (AAM).<sup>386</sup>

Farm women's clubs and Extension homemakers clubs also thrived in Cheyenne County, the first being the Helping Hand Club formed in 1914. In 1986, a history of Cheyenne County recorded the histories of twenty-one women's clubs, all of which were still active and most of which were affiliated with the Extension Service. In fact, several of the nine founders of WIFE were also members of these women's clubs. In 1947, Mickey Spiker and Rose McKay were among the twelve founding members of the North Sidney Social Club, while WIFE founder Jane Rauner joined at a later date. Typical of independent social clubs, the North Sidney Club offered members educational lessons on subjects such as

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<sup>386</sup> Dorothy Larson, "Cheyenne County Farm Bureau," "Meier, Frank," "Cheyenne County Farmers Union of Gueley, NE," and "Gurley Farmers Union Local #773," *Cheyenne County History*, 116-129, 274-275, 300, 307, 760.

In October 1977, amidst drought and falling commodity prices, the American Agriculture Movement began in Campo, Colorado as a general strike intended to raise commodity prices by withholding commodities from the market, refusing to plant in the spring, and refusing to purchase any new equipment or supplies. By December 1977, AAM organized a nationwide protest that drew 200,000 farmers to several state capitals, often arriving in "tractorcades," or massive convoys of tractors and other farm machinery. In January 1978, they took their protest to Washington, D.C. Like many other organizations, the primary goal of the AAM was to achieve parity for agricultural commodities. They quickly proved controversial, however, because their tactics and the fact that few urban Americans sympathized with farmers who complained of limited incomes while driving expensive farm machinery.

Though the AAM was led by men, women did find opportunities to participate. Laurie Schroder of Campo, Colorado, whose husband and father-in-law were founders of the AAM, began her involvement by sitting in an office to wait for the telephone man to show up. She quickly realized that she could help and decided to work more at the office, eventually participating in lobbying trips to Washington, D.C. See: Ryan Stockwell, "Growing a Modern Agrarian Myth: The American Agriculture Movement, Identity, and the Call to Save the Family Farm," MA Thesis (Miami University, 2003); and William P. Browne and John Dinse, "The Emergence of the American Agriculture Movement," *Great Plains Quarterly* 5 (Fall 1985): 221-35.

international travel and self-improvement, as well as opportunities to participate in philanthropic work, group trips, and social luncheons. Rose McKay was also active in an Extension club, while her mother, Caroline Sparks, had actually served as chair of the Cheyenne County Extension Council during the 1930s. Keeping the tradition going, McKay's daughter-in-law and WIFE founder, Deborah McKay, also became active in Extension working during the 1970s and 1980s. Other members retained their membership in Extension clubs well into the 1980s as a means to remain in contact with friends and neighbors. In 1987, WIFE founder Evelyn Flessner was still a member of the Clever Circle Extension Club, one of the oldest in the county. By the 1980s, though, there were just thirteen members, most of whom were older women. A history of Cheyenne County noted, "Perhaps in the early days lessons were of more value to members than at the present, but nevertheless today there is never a club day but what each has been enriched in some way." As of 1986, only three of the thirteen members still lived on farms, one of whom was Flessner. Five members were former rural residents and others were retired teachers. They were long-time friends who no longer desired practical advice, but rather to preserve relationships altered by age and changes in rural life.<sup>387</sup>

Though these organizations thrived, they did not offer women the opportunity to become directly involved with lobbying efforts on behalf of agriculture, and many of the founding members believed them to be ineffective. In January 1977, just one month after they organized as WIFE, founders Mickey Spiker and Joan O'Connell heard about a farmers' rally in Goodland, Kansas, sponsored by the *High Plains Journal*. With less than a day's

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<sup>387</sup> Women could also choose from a breadth of church auxiliaries, professional sororities, and benevolent organizations, see Geraldine Talich, "N.S. (North Sidney) Club," Rose Sparks, "McKay, Robert Sherman and Rose Sparks," Ruth Sparks Miller, "Sparks, James Anderson and Caroline Frederick Kurz," and Lillie Tremain, "Clever Circle Extension Club," in *Cheyenne County History*, 116-129, 752, 965-966.



notice, they decided to go and left early in the morning, driving over five hours on “black ice, snow pack,” to a meeting of more than 300 people. Representatives from all of the major farm organizations, including the Farm Bureau, the National Farm Organization, the Wheat Growers, and the Cattlemen, were there to report on their groups’ activities and to recruit new members. After hearing from members of various groups, Spiker stood up and asked to have the floor. Without a prepared speech, she explained the purpose of WIFE and the letter-writing campaign, but urged the different groups to cooperate in promoting a sound agricultural policy. Spiker said, “Give a damn what organization you are, but let’s get with the program. We’re desperate, and we need help.” Yet she also admonished agricultural leaders for not having done more in the past to support agriculture. “You guys have got the membership, you’ve got the money, you’ve been in business for fifty years, some of you,” she told the audience. “If you’re doing such a hell of a job of it, how come we’re all broke?” Following her speech, an overwhelmed Spiker began to cry. Her speech, however, touched a nerve and the audience gave her a standing ovation. As she and O’Connell left the meeting, they were surrounded by men and women wanting to know more about the letter writing campaign. After arriving home, they both received phone calls and letters from farmers and their wives asking how they could get involved. Spiker found her first public experience with WIFE to be “incredible,” and she and O’Connell decided to “go on the road,” to recruit new members and gain support.<sup>388</sup>

The founders of WIFE conceptualized their new organization not as a study group or one that would simply offer support, but rather a coalition of knowledgeable women who could move and shape policy on the state and federal levels. In February 1977, WIFE

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<sup>388</sup> Spiker Oral History, WIFE Records, UNL.

secretary Marian Lenzen reiterated the organization's mission in a letter to the newly formed chapter in Hugaton, Kansas. Lenzen wrote, "We are not a social organization... We have no queens or princesses. No bake sales and no dues. We are only interested in telling the farm story to those who can do us some good." Lenzen went on to emphasize the importance of public activities, rather than simple discussion in private homes. "It's futile to talk among ourselves," she wrote. "We all know the problem. Low farm prices that are affecting every segment of agriculture. We need to inform our federal and state officials and the general public about this problem."<sup>389</sup>

In its first few weeks and months, WIFE experienced tremendous growth and community support. They received an endorsement from the Cheyenne County Democratic Party, though the members of WIFE reiterated that they were strictly non-partisan. The first members had to pay all of their own travel expenses, but financial support came in the form of donations from individuals and businesses, including the Sidney National Bank, as well as grain elevators and cooperatives. After the women approached the manager of the Fort Sidney Motor Hotel, he allowed the women to meet there for free, the only organization in Cheyenne County to do so. At one of the initial meetings, Sidney attorney Frank Mattoon offered his services free of charge to Mickey Spiker, should the members of WIFE decide to incorporate and copyright their logo. Though Spiker found Mattoon's tone to be insincere, and she herself had little interest in composing bylaws, Spiker recalled that there were several women in the group "responsible enough to suggest that it be done." They accepted

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<sup>389</sup> Marian Lenzen to the Ladies of the Haugaton, Kansas Area, 17 February 1977, WIFE Records, UNL.

Matoon's offer for free legal assistance and by May, Matoon told Spiker his law firm had provided \$1,500 in legal services at no charge to WIFE.<sup>390</sup>

WIFE received much support from the community and the approval of many male farmers who believed the women could accomplish their goals in Washington. In March 1977, Chet Walters, a farmer who lived near Sidney, wrote to WIFE members: "I think you ladies are doing a great job and will continue to do more as you have good organization and will be listened to." He sent them a small check and a copy of his wheat plan so that they might understand how farmers in the area were dealing with the present economic conditions. Many farmers like Walters, as well as local businessmen, showed their support through financial donations, which provided a modest budget for stationary, postage, and other expenses. On 1 February 1977, WIFE treasurer Jane Rauner reported a balance of \$641.56, "with contributions coming in daily." By 22 February, this amount had doubled to a balance of \$1,220.68. While members from Sidney set out to attend regional conferences, meet with state legislators, and establish new local chapters and state organizations in Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas, and Montana, others prepared to travel to Washington, D.C. in March 1977. In January 1977, WIFE gained the support of Nebraska Congresswoman Virginia Smith, who spoke at a public WIFE meeting in Sidney and pledged her support for women traveling to the nation's capitol. Then, on 22 February, members of WIFE debated whether to hire a professional lobbyist, or simply canvass Congress on their own. After learning that lobbyists typically charged \$2,500 per year for part-time work, or \$10,000 for full time, they decided to pay the \$25 fee every two years and lobby on their own behalf.<sup>391</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> Spiker Oral History, WIFE Records, UNL.

<sup>391</sup> Chet Walters to Marian Lenzen, 28 March 1977, WIFE Records, UNL; WIFE Meeting Minutes, Sidney, Nebraska (1 January – 22 February 1977), WIFE Records, UNL.

Initially, members of WIFE decided to set dues at \$2 per year, though this increased to \$15 per year by the early 1980s as the organization developed more extensive programs. Still, most members had to pay their own expenses. For this reason, the support of husbands in their political work was imperative, because donations from the community did not cover all expenses. In 1983, members and former members of WIFE reported spending between \$331 and \$1,061 on their organization activities over the course of their membership, primarily on transportation. These same members traveled an average of thirty miles, round trip, to attend chapter meetings. To participate in conventions, fundraising activities, and lobbying efforts added to the expense. In the same 1983 survey, one woman reported spending \$200 to attend a state steering committee meeting, and \$400 to attend a national meeting. Another woman, who served as state president, claimed to have spent almost \$4,000 in her first year in office. Overall, members believed the inability to pay individual expenses kept many women from participating fully.<sup>392</sup>

In its first months, however, traveling to lobby Congress and meeting with politicians was a novel idea that found wide acceptance in the community. So, with adequate funding, on 1 March 1977, just three months after the initial meeting at the Fort Sidney Motor Hotel, “two bus loads of women” arrived on Capitol Hill to meet with Senators and Congressmen, and to testify before the Senate Agricultural Committee on the state of American agriculture. Before leaving, member Marge Borchert, a farm wife from Gurley, Nebraska, suggested that they all wear red suits to identify themselves as WIFE members, “because our [farm] books are all in red ink.” The women agreed, and this quickly became an identifier not only to other WIFE members, but to those on Capitol Hill. During their initial trip to Washington, the

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<sup>392</sup> Perry-Barnes, 128-129.

eighty-two women participating in the trip found politicians to be receptive, but lukewarm in their response, and unaware of the basic problems associated with agriculture. When one WIFE member from Montana approached her congressman about issues in the cattle industry, he became confused by some of the terminology and she had to explain the processes of birthing calves, particularly that ranchers expected some calves to expire. She “could not believe that this man thought that every cow had a calf, and that it was always a healthy calf, and we got it to the table. It’s incredible.”<sup>393</sup>

WIFE Secretary Marian Lenzen, of Sidney, Nebraska, served as spokeswoman before the Senate Agriculture Committee, and she outlined WIFE’s five basic demands: to obtain 100 percent of parity from the market place, not government supports; to raise standards of living for farm families; to promote understanding among Americans as to the agriculture’s importance to the nation’s welfare and prosperity; to work with consumer organizations in promoting sound economic policies; to work extensively through the educational system, including changing classroom curriculum; and to unite agricultural organizations and political bodies in working toward “prosperity in the field of agriculture.” After introducing herself to the committee, she stated that farm women were not simply upset, they were “FURIOUS!” and informed the senators that the membership had recently adopted the motto, “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.” Yet she also assured them that the members of WIFE were not radicals, and only hoped to “promote prosperity in agriculture in a dignified, energetic, law abiding course of action.” Ultimately, Lenzen believed that the government was responsible for setting prices that would provide a reasonable income for farm families, comparable to incomes of urban workers. She said:

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<sup>393</sup> Spiker Oral History, WIFE Records, UNL.

Farming is a way of life, and it does have some fringe benefits. We do have a rapport with nature that city people are denied. We do breathe clean air and we are determined to keep it that way. BUT, we cannot pay the bills with clean air. The doctor and the merchant demand dollars. All too often farmers live poor and die rich.”

In her testimony, Lenzen clearly articulated WIFE’s mission and its members’ views of American agriculture. For women with little political experience, this was a significant achievement after just three months of organizing.<sup>394</sup>

It is interesting to note, however, that despite her aggressive testimony, Lenzen still described herself as an “average middle aged American housewife,” while referring to farming as a typically male occupation. She said that as “farm wives, we see on a day to day basis the fear and frustration and defeat that comes after a man has worked hard, done a good job, brought forth man’s most basic need, and then finds he cannot sell that product.” Lenzen spoke as if women, even though they were directly involved with the farming operations, were somehow on the outside looking in. She pointed out to the senators that the average age of the American farmer was 52.4 years, and said, “If agriculture were as prosperous as the bureaucrats in the USDA would have you believe, farming would not be a business dominated by men of that age and older.” Lenzen went on to discuss the difficulties young *men* faced as they tried to start farming on their own, but said nothing of their wives, or of women who might want to farm independently.<sup>395</sup>

In less than a year, in October 1977, WIFE hosted its first national convention in Sidney, Nebraska. More than 250 delegates from Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, Kansas, Arizona, Washington, Montana, and Texas attended the two-day event. In December 1977, in

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<sup>394</sup> “Oral Testimony before the Senate Agriculture Committee, March 1, 1977, Given by Marian Lenzen, Spokeswoman for WIFE,” WIFE Records, UNL.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid.

a speech at the National Farm Women's Forum in Kansas City, Missouri, WIFE member Donna Fuehrer recounted the events of the past year, including their participation in a formal Congressional hearing on Representative Virginia's Smith's bill on the labeling and inspection of imported meat. Fuehrer proudly declared that "Interest in WIFE spread across the country like a prairie fire in a high wind." The women had "taken a bull by the horns," organizing seventy-one chapters in eight states.<sup>396</sup>

Despite these early successes, however, a nationwide survey of farm women in 1980 found that only 2 percent of women surveyed reported membership in an exclusively women's farm organization such as the United Farm Wives, American Agri-Women, or WIFE. This suggests that these women's organizations were not particularly popular among the general population of farm women. Yet the formation of such organizations, as well as the large number of women who attended early WIFE meetings, hints at an underlying shift in the ways that many farm women conceptualized their work and voiced their concerns.<sup>397</sup>

In many ways, though they eschewed Second Wave feminism, WIFE was typical of women's political groups during the 1970s and certainly benefited from trends influenced by feminism. In addition to legislation that attempted to prohibit sex discrimination in the military and educational institutions, including Title IX of the 1972 Education Act, by the early 1970s, more women sought, and won, elected offices in their own right. Historian Bruce J. Schulman argued that these women politicians represented a "new breed," because

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<sup>396</sup> Donna Fuehrer, "Meet the Challenge – Get Involved!" a speech at the National Farm Women's Forum, 9 December 1977, Kansas City, Missouri, WIFE Records, UNL.

<sup>397</sup> Overall, 40 percent of the women surveyed were involved in a general farm organization or an auxiliary to a general farm organization, including the Grange, the Farm Bureau, or the National Farmers Union, while 21 percent belonged to marketing or farm supply cooperatives, and 14 percent belonged to a commodity producers' association, or an auxiliary of a commodity producer's association. Rachel Ann Rosenfeld, *Farm Women: Work, Farm, and Family in the United States* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 193, 196-198.

they entered politics through their own volition, rather than simply succeeding their husbands. They were also younger and tended to have families. In a 1972 speech before the new organization, the National Women's Political Caucus, political activist Patricia Schroeder declared that women, "can no longer be mere spectators of the political process, critics on the sidelines; but active participants, playing an important and vital role out on the field." Furthermore, the media paid considerable attention to "women's lib," and stories of women breaking barriers and fighting discrimination, whether they were portrayed positively or negatively, made their way into the nightly news and popular periodicals. The idea that women could, and should, take on public roles became part of the public discourse, and did not require that women be Second Wave feminists.<sup>398</sup>

The members of WIFE took advantage of these new attitudes toward women and they sought recognition from politicians and agricultural leaders for their legitimate role as producers and contributors to the farm. They confronted the demeaning image of farm wives in popular culture, while addressing the difficulties and uncertainties of farm life in an honest and direct manner. In January 1977, Marian Lenzen, WIFE secretary, wrote a letter to Jimmy Carter in which she demanded that he fulfill campaign promises to raise support prices on grain, with the argument that farmers and their wives deserved "fair compensation for the labor that they contribute to the family farm." This change was not confined to women in organizations. In her 1976 intergenerational survey of Michigan farm women, anthropologist Lembi Kongas found that by the 1970s, farm women enjoyed more options than their mothers and grandmothers. They could travel more frequently, take off-farm work, or pursue

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<sup>398</sup> Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 163-165.



farming with greater freedom and perceived choice. Younger farm women tended to be “extremely well-informed, extremely mobile, and extremely sophisticated,” individuals with strong connections to their home and communities. Kongas surveyed women ranging in age from 29 to 94, with various levels of income, and found that the greatest difference across the generations was the fact that younger women were “more independent, more persons in their own right, and more interested in the world around them.”<sup>399</sup>

At their first meetings, members of WIFE realized the extensive and diverse nature of problems in agriculture, and they intentionally designed their organization to address these broad issues. That the women chose to emphasize “Economics” in their name is not surprising, because the 1970s proved to be an unstable and unpredictable decade for all sectors of the American economy as rising costs of fuel and stagflation brought increased prices and high rates of unemployment. As members of WIFE organized, they understood that farmers were not the only group dealing with inflation and soaring costs of production. Small grocers could not compete with the increasing numbers of national supermarket chains that offered greater selection and lower prices. Likewise, small-scale meat packers and food processors could not afford to adopt new technologies, making it impossible for them to offer competitively priced products. As a result, many of the smaller processing plants closed their doors while large companies such as IBP, Cargill, and ConAgra bought out older companies and revolutionized the food industry.<sup>400</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> Cheryl Tevis, “Why Did You Become a Farm Wife?” *Farm Wife News* 6, no. 11 (November 1976), 18-19.

<sup>400</sup> For an excellent discussion of agricultural economics, meatpacking, and food processing in the post-Second World War period, see: Jon Lauck, *American Agriculture and the Problem of Monopoly: The Political Economy of Grain Belt Farming, 1953-1980* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 96-140.

Members of WIFE were particularly concerned with the new corporate nature of agribusiness because it represented a loss of control and independence. This was further exacerbated by trends in depopulation, a loss of political power, rising costs of production, and the “get big or get out” mentality. Between 1950 and 1960, the U.S. farm population fell from 23 million, representing 15 percent of the population, to 15.6 million, representing 8.7 percent of the American population. In the years, between 1970 and 1976, as more and more young people left the farm for college or jobs in the cities, the farm population declined by 14 percent. This not only raised concerns about the future of family farms and small town businesses, but this loss of population also meant a loss of political power. Until the 1960s, congressional districts were based on outdated population data that disproportionately favored rural areas, giving rise to a powerful “Farm Bloc” in Congress. In 1963, however, the Supreme Court ruled in *Baker v. Carr* that districts should periodically redraw to account for changes in population. This issue of representation dominated agricultural politics throughout the decade, and agricultural leaders rightly feared that rural depopulation would create a severe disadvantage for farmers in Washington, D.C. They argued that sound farm policies and financial resources for price supports lost out to the urban and suburban consumers, industrialists, and businessmen profited at the expense of farm families.<sup>401</sup>

Agricultural leaders of this period, including members of WIFE, accused federal officials of promoting over production through anti-poverty programs, like food stamps, and the Food for Peace program, established in 1954 to promote good will with communist nations. Though farmers did benefit from these programs, and farm income increased

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<sup>401</sup> R. Douglas Hurt, *Problems of Plenty* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 122; Robert Reinhold, “Decrease in Farm Population Accelerates: Figures Show a 14% Decline From 1970-76,” *New York Times*, 15 April 1977, quoted in Ryan Stockwell, “Growing a Modern Agrarian Myth: The American Agriculture Movement, Identity, and the Call to Save the Family Farm,” MA Thesis (Miami University, 2003) 11, 46.

steadily until 1974, federal policies aimed at reducing domestic food prices and grain embargos intended to protest Soviet expansion, led many farmers to believe they had become pawns in a political game. In 1973, for example, consumers across the United States boycotted beef to protest inflation in food prices, and to combat this trend and maintain consumer confidence, President Richard Nixon set maximum prices for beef, veal, pork, and lamb. In 1975, President Gerald Ford once again attempted to regulate domestic food prices by halting the sale of grain to the Soviet Union and depressing the market value of grain products. Because these policies came out of the Office of the President, it becomes clearer as to why the founding members of WIFE sought a direct dialogue with Jimmy Carter.<sup>402</sup>

In addition to depopulation and the loss of political power, many rural residents began to fear for the future of the “family farm,” as the mechanization of agriculture reduced the need for human labor but increased initial costs. Though the number of farms fell considerably, between 1945 and 1960, the total number of acres harvested in the United States grew from 324 million acres to 354 million acres. At the same time, new technologies and more efficient machinery increased output per acre by 20 to 25 percent, and American farmers produced more than ever. The state of Nebraska, and Cheyenne County, also experienced these changes. Between 1935 and 1982, the total number of farms in Nebraska fell from 133,616 to 60,243, while the average size farm increased from 348.9 acres to 746 acres. In Cheyenne County, between 1964 and 1982, the number of farms dropped from 797 to 701, while the average size farm increased over 100 acres, from 966.5 to 1,073. During this same period, farms appeared to enjoy unprecedented prosperity and rapid growth. In 1959, the market value of agricultural products sold stood at an average of \$13,272 per farm

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<sup>402</sup> Stockwell, 46-47.

in Nebraska. Within ten years, by 1969, the average market value of farm products sold more than doubled, to a state average of \$29,725. Within five years, in 1974, this amount had grown to \$55,224, and by 1982, the average market value of farm products sold nearly doubled again, to an average of \$109,984 per farm. Farms in Cheyenne County enjoyed similar growth, with the average market value of agricultural products sold growing by more than five times between 1969 and 1982, from an average of \$21,012 to an average of \$121,317 per farm.<sup>403</sup>

While these numbers should have indicated significant financial gains for farm families, the picture becomes grim when one takes into account the rising costs of production. Inflation, more expensive equipment, and the rising costs of chemicals, feed, fertilizers, and fuel account for this increase. In Nebraska, between 1969 and 1974, farm production expenses soared from a total of \$1,759,085,000 to \$2,845,563,000. During this same five-year period, between 1969 and 1974, changes were even more dramatic in Cheyenne County, where total farm production expenses more than doubled from \$13,419,000 to \$29,045,000. In 1969, this amounted to an average of \$17,541 per farm, compared to an average of \$38,726 per farm in 1974, when the average market value of farm products sold was \$55,398 per farm. This marked a significant increase in farm income, but this was short-lived. The problems of overproduction and uncertain export markets made agriculture extremely unstable. Following the grain embargoes of the mid-1970s, commodity prices fell dramatically, with wheat dropping from \$5.86 a bushel in 1974 to \$1.92 in 1977.

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<sup>403</sup> United States Census of Agriculture 1969, Volume I, Part 20: Nebraska (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), vii, 137; United States Census of Agriculture 1974, Volume I, Part 27: Nebraska (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), I-1, IV-104; United States Census of Agriculture 1982, Volume I, Part 27: Nebraska (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), viii, 5, 122, 148; Gilbert Fite, *American Farmers: The New Minority* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 116.

Similarly, corn that sold at \$3.02 per bushel in 1974, sold for just \$2.02 per bushel in 1977. Total farm income fell from \$34 billion in 1973 to \$20 billion in 1976, and by 1977, farm income fell 40 percent below 1973 levels. This intensified the cost-price squeeze that kept many farmers from meeting the cost of production, and became an especially acute problem for those who borrowed money to invest in new land or equipment in more prosperous years. According to a September 1977 *New York Times Article*, adjusted for inflation, farm income for 1976 was actually less than what farmers earned during the Great Depression.<sup>404</sup>

These trends continued throughout the 1970s, and between 1978 and 1982, feed prices for livestock and poultry increased 28.9 percent, while prices for commercial fertilizer increased 21.8 percent, 60.2 percent for agricultural chemicals, 67 percent for energy and petroleum products, and 29.3 percent for hired farm labor. While farm families had been dealing with rising costs of production throughout the twentieth century, inflation and price controls on consumer products ignited outrage among many rural residents who found the only way to compete in the modern economy was to increase the size of their operation, or leave farming all together.<sup>405</sup>

Members of WIFE, like many farm women, believed they had a unique perspective on rising fuel costs, grain embargoes, price ceilings, and stagflation, particularly escalating food prices. Unlike urban and suburban women who only worried about cutting household costs, farm women understood both sides of the equation and expressed frustration as food

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<sup>404</sup> William Robbins, "Farmers' Total Income at Depression Level," *New York Times*, 23 September 1977, quoted in Stockwell, 45.

<sup>405</sup> United States Census of Agriculture 1969, Volume I, Part 20: Nebraska (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), vii, 137; United States Census of Agriculture 1974, Volume I, Part 27: Nebraska (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), I-1, IV-104; United States Census of Agriculture 1982, Volume I, Part 27: Nebraska (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), viii, 5, 122, 148.

prices soared while the market value of agricultural commodities barely met the costs of production. A February 1974 article in the *New York Times* declared that farm women “down on the farm in Iowa” were no different than “housewives in Queens, Sioux City, or Burbank.” Though the farm women of past generations, who grew much of what their families ate, the modern farm wife fed her family, “What she buys from her grocer’s shelves or has delivered by the milkman.” The article featured Mr. and Mrs. Dwight Winkleman of Thompson, Iowa, who enjoyed high prices for corn and soybeans, but wondered how long such prosperity could last. In a matter of three months, during her weekly trips to the grocery store, Mrs. Winkleman saw the price of ground chuck go from 89 cents per pound to \$1.29, and a ten-pound bag of sugar go from \$1.49 to \$1.97. Her family reaped little benefit from rising consumer prices, and her husband noted that “we’re looking at the highest prices we’ve ever paid for things we use... we’ve got to do some real scheming to go on operating the way we’re capable of.” In many ways, then, their roles as consumers actually fueled their desired to improve agricultural prices.<sup>406</sup>

The nine founding members of WIFE probably viewed these economic and political trends as unsettling because most had been farming with their husbands since the 1940s and 1950s, and they saw first hand the effects of depopulation and technological change. Though most of the founders grew up during the uncertain period between 1920 and 1945, many were descended from nineteenth century homesteaders, or families with particularly strong work ethics, and the women seemed to share an idealized vision of childhood and rural life. For example, WIFE founder Evelyn Flessner was born in 1926, the youngest of seven

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<sup>406</sup> Seth S. King, “Down on the Farm in Iowa, The Fret Over Food Bills,” *New York Times* (17 February 1974), 61.

children, on a homestead near Lodgepole, Nebraska. Her father, Karl Louis Schwartz, immigrated from Losen, Germany in 1889 at the age of 11, while her mother, Anna Borges was raised on a Nebraska homestead. After attending Kearny State Teachers College and teaching in rural schools for three years, Flessner married Lavern Flessner, himself a lifelong resident of Cheyenne County who began farming for himself at twenty-one. Evelyn and Lavern stayed on their farm well into the 1980s, and Evelyn took great pride in her rural heritage. In a history of Cheyenne County, Flessner wrote of her childhood, “It was always great to come home after school to the aroma of freshly-baked bread, often newly churned butter and tomato preserves or apple butter as well, sometimes fried chicken warming in the oven too. Nearly every Sunday Mom would bake pies.” She also recalled important relationships among neighbors and family members. She wrote, “Our home was a haven where all were welcome. Large groups of relatives, neighbors, and friends spent many afternoons with us hunting coyotes, rabbits, playing cards or checkers, or maybe just a lot of practical jokes. We had a lot of fun and were never bored.”<sup>407</sup>

Even for members who were married to farmers, but who grew up in town, this rural nostalgia was an extremely important part of their identity. Marilyn “Mickey” Spiker was born in Omaha, Nebraska 1924 and adopted as an infant by Niels and Viola Miller. Her father sold real estate and had an office in Sidney, yet the lore of homesteading and life on the open plains was a prominent theme in the Spiker household. Marilyn’s mother, Viola, was born in a sod house near Sidney and often recalled “rounding up wild horses on open range.” In a short biography for a history of Cheyenne County, Marilyn emphasized her

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<sup>407</sup> Lavern and Evelyn Flessner, “Flessner, Lavern and Evelyn,” and Hilda Boehmer, Lillian Sullivan, and Evelyn Flassner, “Schwartz, Karl L. and Anna Borges,” in *Cheyenne County History*, 509-510, 941-942.

mother's pioneer spirit. She wrote that as the only girl with four brothers, Viola "could ride well, long and hard. She would put on a pair of men's trousers and ride saddle. She would have to sneak into the house and put on a long skirt before she could appear if there were company." In her recollections of her mother, Marilyn bordered on the heroic, noting that Viola "killed many rattlesnakes, some with a bridle rein. She skinned them and made belts for her brothers." Yet Viola was also highly educated. She graduated from Sidney High School where she was on the first yearbook staff, then earned a teaching certificate from Kearney State Teachers College, and taught school for several years before her marriage to Niels.<sup>408</sup>

1944, Marilyn married Keith H. Spiker, who after the Second World War, took over his parent's wheat operation north of Sidney. The couple had three sons, Terrell, Keith, and Jerry, and remained on the farm until they retired in 1984. Both Marilyn and Keith were avid HAM radio operators, and often used their skills to assist county officials in times of emergency. They were also involved in a variety of organizations, including Extension Clubs and the United Methodist Church in Sidney, though it is her mother's influence that explains Marilyn's understanding of her role as a farm wife and a rural woman. In her study of women in organizations in the early twentieth century, historian Mary Neth found that women who became community leaders had been reared to value "strength and ambition." Mothers often provided "a strong model for women as farm partners," and led their families by example.<sup>409</sup>

It was not just nostalgia, however, that characterized and motivated the founding members. Because many of the members had reached the point at which they would be

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<sup>408</sup> Mrs. Don Olmstead, "Miller, Marilyn Pauline," Marilyn Spiker, "Osborn, Viola Blanche," and "Spiker, Harold and Mary Walker," in *Cheyenne County History*, 775, 853, 968.

<sup>409</sup> Mrs. Don Olmstead, "Miller, Marilyn Pauline," in *Cheyenne County History*, 775;



handing down the farming operations to their children, WIFE founders also shared a deep concern about the viability of agriculture in the future. Rose Sparks McKay, for example, was born in 1926 in Sidney, Nebraska and began farming in Cheyenne County with her husband, Robert, in 1946. She had three sons, Dan, Ken, and Mark, who were all incorporated into the family farm in 1986. McKay's family had a long tradition of community involvement, as her father, James Sparks, was a member of the Farmer's Union, while her mother, Caroline Sparks, served as an Extension leader. Throughout their marriage, Robert McKay was also involved in the Farmer's Union, as well as the Farmers Coop Grain, Elk's Club, Jaycees, and the First United Methodist Church in Sydney. The family clearly had strong roots in the Sidney area and were particularly interested in keeping the family farm solvent. In December 1976, Rose's daughter-in-law, Deborah McKay, who married Dan and had two daughters, was also a founding member of WIFE. Dan and Deborah expected to take over part of the farming operation, and it is clear that Rose and Deborah shared concerns for the future.<sup>410</sup>

None articulated these fears, however, as well than the first WIFE secretary, Marian Lenzen. Like Spiker, Lenzen did not grow up on a farm, but as a child she learned about hard work from her mother and was quite familiar with economic instability. Born in 1928 in Fairbury, Nebraska to Frank and Katherine Loch, the family moved often to follow Frank's work constructing roads. They moved first though Nebraska, then to California. During the Second World War, the family then relocated to Omaha, Nebraska where Frank and Katherine worked in the Martin Bomber Plant, and where Frank learned the skills he would

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<sup>410</sup> Rose Sparks McKay, "McKay, Robert Sherman and Rose Sparks," and Ruth Sparks Miller, "Sparks, James Anderson and Karoline Frederick Kurz," in *Cheyenne County History*, 752, 965-966.

need to become an electrician. In 1945, they moved again to Sidney, where Frank opened Frank Loch Electric, a retail store specializing in a variety of consumer appliances. The store began as a small operation in the family garage, eventually moving to a large building on Sidney's main street. It was Marian's mother, however, who took the primary responsibility for the store. While Katherine, "a knowledgeable sales woman," oversaw the payroll, bookkeeping, and advertising, Frank performed electrical wiring and contract work. In a biography of her parents she wrote for the history of Cheyenne County, Marian expressed great pride in her parents' work ethic, but she was even more impressed by her mother's "lifelong" commitment to the Democratic party and her belief that the "government had an obligation to help the poor."<sup>411</sup>

In 1947, Marian married Jerome Lenzen, a farmer who grew up in the Sidney area and bought his own land in 1942. Over time, he added to his holdings by purchasing more land in 1947 and 1950, then again in 1980 and 1984. The couple operated an 880-acre wheat farm and cattle ranch, and they began their married life by moving an old schoolhouse on their land and remodeling it into the family home. Over time, they added to the schoolhouse to accommodate their seven children, four sons and three daughters. After twenty-five years as a homemaker, Marian decided to begin writing and become active in politics and the peace movement.<sup>412</sup>

On November 6, 1975, Lenzen received national attention when she published an editorial titled, "Let NYC go down the drain," on the op-ed page of the *New York Times*. In this article, she blamed urban residents for demanding lower food prices and thereby keeping

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<sup>411</sup> Marian Lenzen, "Loch, Frank and Katherine Bennett," in *Cheyenne County History*, 717-718.

<sup>412</sup> Marian Lenzen, "Lenzen, Jerome N. and Marian Ruth Loch," in *Cheyenne County History*, 700.

agricultural prices low. She chastised New Yorkers for demanding federal money for urban improvement and supporting minimum wage laws, “a support price for labor,” when they refused to back price supports for farmers. She argued that prosperity in agriculture was good for the nation as a whole, and if New Yorkers could not understand this, then perhaps it would be best to “saw NYC off, tow it to the middle of the Atlantic, cut it loose, and forget the whole thing.” Lenzen received hundreds of letters, and was interviewed for national television by NBC News. It was this experience in the public eye that made her an ideal secretary and spokeswoman when members of WIFE first started dealing with policy makers on the state and federal levels.<sup>413</sup>

Though she worked to secure a better future for agriculture, Lenzen was not particularly optimistic for her own family’s situation. In December 1979, Lenzen testified at a USDA hearing on the Structure of American Agriculture in Omaha, Nebraska. She told the story of her husband’s parents, German immigrants who worked to make their homestead a prosperous inheritance for their sons. Yet Lenzen stated that for her children, farming was not an option. Trends in agriculture, coupled with federal policies that favored wealthy farmers, made it impossible for their family to compete. Though she and her husband owned 880 acres, she did not believe this would be enough to support a family. She said, “We knew, simply by observation and common sense, that farming was not in the future of our children. So we never let them farm. Our children never plowed a field, milked a cow, fed a calf, slopped a hog, or raised chickens.” Instead, Lenzen and her husband encouraged the children to excel in school and “develop an interest in anything but farming” because “it is easier to

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<sup>413</sup> Marian Lenzen, “Nebraskan: Let New York Go ‘Down the Drain,’” *New York Times* (6 November 1975), 41.

become a doctor than it is to become a farmer.” Though she was proud of her children, she lamented the fact that the family farm would be rented out when she and her husband retired to “someone primarily interested in a fast buck.” She believed it was too late to save the Lenzen farm for their children, but asked that the government reformulate policies to help other families hold on to family land.<sup>414</sup>

The founding members of WIFE shared several important characteristics, primarily their connection to the farm and to the local area, as seen through their nostalgia of better times for agriculture and their commitment to community service. Their discontent did not arise out of their status as women, but out of their apprehension for the future of farming as a way of life. They were particularly concerned about the fact that as farm families became a minority in the U.S., they would lose their voice in politics and in the general public discourse. In the spring of 1977, Marian Lenzen gave a speech in which she demanded that “the government be involved at a level to insure the farmer a fair return for his investment and labor.” She declared that “WIFE is a communications campaign. The pen is our weapon.” Lenzen cited statistics and commodity prices, but concluded with the statement, “Farm women are the most overworked, underpaid, unheard minority in the nation today.” Likewise, Marilyn Spiker recalled that in December 1976, when the first nine women met in Sidney, they believed they were “slaves, working long hours to feed the world, and borrowing money to do it, while others became rich from the fruits of our labor.”<sup>415</sup>

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<sup>414</sup> Marian Lenzen, “It’s too late for our family,” in Kenneth M. Coughlin, ed. *Perspectives on the Structure of American Agriculture: Volume I: The View from the Farm – Special Problems of Minority and Low-Income Farmers* (United States Department of Agriculture, 1980), 3-4.

<sup>415</sup> Marian Lenzen, untitled speech, undated, ca. Spring 1977, WIFE Records, UNL; Spiker Oral History, WIFE Records, UNL.

Unlike other farm women's organizations, members of WIFE had few qualms about openly expressing anger and frustration. In early letters and testimonies, members of WIFE described themselves as "victims" and "slaves" of a poorly organized and neglected sector of the economy. In January 1977, Mrs. Bill Hoffeditz, a WIFE member and farm wife from Hoxie, Kansas, wrote a three-page letter to the Carter-Mondale Transition Office in which she stated that when they totaled their hours worked on the farm, she and her husband earned just 22 cents an hour. She complained that "my husband has to pay someone to work if he wants a day off or goes on vacation. And you cannot tell a chicken that a 4 or 5 day week is all he wants to work, so the other 2 or 3 days, to forget laying eggs." Though Hoddefitz was optimistic that Jimmy Carter, "a farmer-president," would listen to her, she concluded, "What we really want is our voices heard. If it takes the woman's voice to do it, then you shall hear it – LOUD and CLEAR. We are sick and tired of getting the shaft from our government and cohorts."<sup>416</sup>

This anger did not go unnoticed. Immediately, reporters and media representatives recognized the unique nature of WIFE. When commenting on the organization's motto, "Hell Hath No Fury Like a Woman Scorned," one article in the January 1978 issue of the *Rural Electric Nebraskan* stated, "If this indicated they are not a social group, you're right. They are angry. Mad as wet hens." The article cited an incident in October 1977, when Undersecretary of Agriculture, economist Howard Hjort spoke at the first national WIFE convention in at the Sidney Junior High School in Sidney, Nebraska. Even before he finished his speech, the women interrupted and admonished Hjort for using outdated statistics and making "erroneous" statements about the future of agriculture. When Betty Majors, national

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<sup>416</sup> Mrs. Bill Hoffeditz to the Carter-Mondale Transition Office, 13 January 1977, WIFE Records, UNL.

WIFE president, stepped up to the microphone and said, “You people (in the USDA) have no earthly concept of what’s happening to us,” she received a standing ovation. The article in the *Rural Electric Nebraskan* noted that at one point, Hjort told the audience that “people who take an extreme position do not get very far in Washington.” The women took this to mean that he viewed them as “extremists,” and there began an “ominous” stirring among the 350 women in attendance. As women lined up at the microphone to set Hjort straight, “the female hackles were rising. You could feel it in the air.”<sup>417</sup>

Mickey Spiker, who encouraged many of the women to approach the microphone that night, had few qualms about tell Hjort that he wrong to use outdated statistics. Afterwards, her husband, Keith, told her that USDA officials often spoke at meetings for the Wheatgrowers and used the same obsolete information, yet the men in that organization usually thank the speaker politely then “go into the bar and just tear the guy apart.” Of WIFE, however, Keith said, “You didn’t wait for that, you told him to his face and you didn’t assassinate his character.” Hjort on the other hand, was dumfounded. After the furor died down, he told the remaining members of the audience, “when I was in private business last year as an analyst everywhere I spoke I was considered the greatest expert in the world. But the minute I got behind a desk in the government I was looked on as a liar.” Hjort’s humiliation was a source of pride for many of the members, though caused others members great embarrassment over what they believed was “unseemly” behavior, and several members actually left WIFE after this incident.<sup>418</sup>

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<sup>417</sup> “Hey, President Carter! These Women are M.A.D.!” *Rural Electric Nebraskan* (January 1978), 14-15, in WIFE records, UNL; Perry-Barnes, 53.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid.; Spiker Oral History, WIFE Records, UNL.

Certainly, this angry, aggressive approach did not necessarily appeal to all farm women. In March 1977, Beth Klosterman of David City, Nebraska wrote to WIFE secretary Marian Lenzen after Lenzen gave a speech in her local area. Klosterman objected to Lenzen's assertion that other farm organizations failed to create a united front for agriculture. In doing this, Klosterman believed informed Lenzen that she "played the old game very well, with apparently no consideration for the concerted aim that has been made recently by the farm organizations to speak as one." While Klosterman believed WIFE to be a good idea in principle, and was herself highly active in the auxiliary of the Livestock Feeders Association, she believed little could be accomplished "by working outside the coalition of farm organization with which our husbands are affiliated and which have been working very diligently and effectively for many years." She concluded that WIFE had put a "serious crack in the wall of solidarity," between organizations, and was only encouraging urban residents to view rural residents as incapable and disorganized. In her closing, Klosterman told Lenzen that she owed an apology to the "agricultural people of this country and other agricultural people."<sup>419</sup>

Even within the group, many members were unsure about how to best present WIFE, particularly when it involved working with or representing other organizations. This problem was particularly acute in WIFE's first year, when members often organized so quickly, they were not able to first clearly articulate WIFE's precise mission. In March 1977, for example, Linda Shoeneman of Roggen, Colorado wrote to the WIFE leaders in Sidney to ask for help with problems already occurring in her new local chapter. She wrote that shortly after she and several women officially organized, the county Extension agent approached them to ask

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<sup>419</sup> Beth Klosterman to Marian Lenzen, 22 March 1977, WIFE Records, UNL.

if WIFE would be interested in joining a county-wide coalition of agricultural organizations, implement dealers, agribusiness men, and others. While Shoeneman could see many positive aspects of joining the coalition, she also feared that it could “destroy our effectiveness” as WIFE would be working for another group with varied interests.<sup>420</sup>

In her reply, WIFE secretary Marian Lenzen explained that this was not an unusual problem, and “we have others who have tried to use our organization to further their own ideas and we have tried to stop it.” Lenzen’s first concern was that if the Roggen, Colorado chapter joined the county coalition, it would mean working with men, and “we are strictly for women.” She encouraged the women to participate in public events, but only as representatives of WIFE, not as members of larger organizations that tended to ignore women’s voices. Lenzen wrote, “Your WIFE chapter could participate the same as say, Wheatgrowers or Farm Bureau, etc. You see, your extension agent is not asking these other organizations to give up their own identity.” Ultimately, however, she asked Shoeneman to be patient and to wait for the national organization to approve the final draft of by-laws. Lenzen commented that confusion among local chapters was common, as “we never expected some rapid growth and were unprepared to handle it.”<sup>421</sup>

Even if the founding members did use direct, often aggressive language, they were extremely concerned about appearing too radical or outside of the agricultural community. In April 1977, when eight Nebraska WIFE members traveled to Great Falls, Montana to establish a state organization, they found women who wanted to raise prices by depriving consumers of basic foodstuffs. She proposed starting “a boycott of farm machinery, a total

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<sup>420</sup> Linda Shoeneman to Joy Ankeny, undated letter, WIFE Records, UNL.

<sup>421</sup> Marian Lenzen to Linda Shoeneman, 30 March 1977, WIFE Records, UNL.



withdrawal of grain from the market for six weeks, and a hold on feeder cattle from market.”

The Nebraska members, including Marian Lenzen, quickly responded by refusing support such action. Lenzen told the women present that members of WIFE believed in “affirmative action,” and that a “communicating campaign can be influential if it is massive enough.”

They sought strength in numbers and they wanted to educate and inform consumers, and they wanted to work through the existing political system rather than threaten politicians and consumers with strikes.<sup>422</sup>

One of WIFE’s biggest early challenges, however, was how to deal with the growing momentum of the American Agriculture Movement (AAM), an organization formed in 1977 to promote withholding strikes and stage dramatic protests, with tractorcades rolling into state capitals and into Washington, D.C. Though some members of WIFE were sympathetic, state and national leaders feared that any association between the two groups would lead the public to perceive WIFE as something other than a group dedicated entirely to political lobbying. Furthermore, leaders feared that if too many WIFE members became involved in the AAM, the organization risked losing its identity, as well as its authority, in political circles. In some cases, this did occur, when some WIFE members reported having to explain that WIFE was not the auxiliary for the AAM. In January 1978, when she was president of Nebraska WIFE, Mickey Spiker encouraged women to become involved with AAM, but warned members to avoid doing anything in the name of WIFE. She wrote, “Many of you are helping in the American Agriculture Offices and with their efforts. Great!” Spiker then detailed her own support of the strike, but stated “*We must not associate WIFE with the American Agriculture strike efforts!* We can only support it as individuals. When fair prices

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<sup>422</sup> Marian Lenzen, “WIFE Montana Trip,” (5 April 1977) WIFE Records, UNL.

for our commodities are realized we want to have a secure WIFE organization working on every issue that needs our attention” (emphasis in original).<sup>423</sup>

Most members appeared to support this policy of separating individual work from organizational goals, particularly if keeping WIFE a separate, independent organization meant greater public confidence. In February 1979, for example, Betty Majors, national WIFE president, appeared in a news story broadcast by KHAS TV out of Hastings, Nebraska. Throughout her interview, the television station ran images and footage of the protests by the AAM. The following day, Barbara Thomas, the corresponding secretary for the Jewell County, Kansas WIFE chapter, wrote a letter to Majors in which she asked whether Majors had been aware of this at the time. Thomas wrote, “We are working very hard in our community to live down this image of being a feminist militant group. Our membership will never grow as long as people are afraid to even attend our meetings.” She believed that the broadcast did little to help WIFE’s image, and though she was not against the AAM, Thomas believed it imperative to keep WIFE an independent, separate organization.<sup>424</sup>

The primary solution to the problem was to encourage members of WIFE to act as individuals, not as representatives of the organization. Interestingly, this policy was not just limited to keeping a distance from groups perceived as radical, but from any work or organization that did not directly improve the status of agriculture. In a February 1979 letter to the Nebraska membership, President Joan O’Connell reminded members to “use caution in anything that you say or do in the name of WIFE.” O’Connell had received calls from

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<sup>423</sup> Perry-Barnes, 101; Marilyn Spiker to Nebraska WIFE membership, WIFE Records, UNL.

<sup>424</sup> Barbara Thomas to Betty Majors, 20 February 1979, WIFE Records, UNL.

concerned teachers who reported that members of a local WIFE chapter had been checking into the teaching of “regionalism” in local schools. Though O’Connell had few qualms with the women’s efforts, she did not believe their work to be relevant to the problems in agriculture. She wrote, “We must be concerned that we act with “High Ethics” in our actions, and to investigate situations more pertinent to agriculture in the name of WIFE and other areas of concern as a private citizen.”<sup>425</sup>

Another strategy to combat perceptions of WIFE as a radical group was to promote a positive image of the membership, and from the very beginning, members worked very hard to maintain a professional, “lady-like” image. While the WIFE by-laws defined members as “all women involved or interested in agriculture, regardless of race, color, or national origin,” the by-laws also stipulated that the purposes and policies of WIFE be carried out in a dignified and law-abiding manner. This was an essential part of the organization’s mission, as members of WIFE wanted to disprove popular images of farmers and farm wives as rough, uneducated, and disorganized people who “maligned each other in public, testified in overalls, and in general gave the public good reason to think of them as bumpkins.” Mickey Spiker recalled that one of the best early decisions they made was to wear red suits during meetings with politicians and policy makers because she believed this uniform imparted credibility. She said, “We do want to go as ladies. We do have our facts straight, and... we conduct ourselves as intelligent, classy ladies. We need to overcome that image of, you know, these hick farmers.”<sup>426</sup>

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<sup>425</sup> Joan O’Connell to Nebraska WIFE membership, February 1979, WIFE Records, UNL.

<sup>426</sup> Perry-Barnes, 53; National Constitution and By-laws, WIFE, amended November 1982, WIFE Records, UNL; Spiker Oral History.

By 1982, members of WIFE sought to refine their image once again, this time voting to drop the motto, “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.” The adage had appeared on all stationary and promotional materials since the earliest days of the organization, yet at the 1982 National Convention, members declared that the motto was a “bit too militant.” Many believed it only furthered negative stereotypes, while others were uncomfortable writing letters to policy makers, agribusinesses, and community members with a motto that did little to spread good will.<sup>427</sup>

Such efforts to present a “lady-like” image were not unique to WIFE, and were common among women in agricultural organizations. During the late 1970s, American Agri-women published a pamphlet titled, “How to be a vocal farm wife OR How are they gonna find out if WE don’t tell them?” Written by Laura Heuser, a national organizer for American Agri-Women and orchard manager from Hartford, Michigan, the pamphlet first encouraged women to take action, start a local group, and “start reading.” She urged women to get informed, to read periodicals, and to ask questions of their husbands, of businessmen, and of politicians. Most importantly, she urged women to speak publicly and lend a voice to women in agriculture. According to Heuser, however, appearance and demeanor were also important components of activism. She wrote, “Now, you. Face it, people in this country listen better to attractive people. Not necessarily beautiful – attractive.” She told women that they should present a sophisticated image, and asked women, “How long since you changed your make-up? Are you at the age when you need more subtle color? A new hair style? False eyelashes? Do you look like Miss 1949? Very few of us are so divine that there isn’t room for some improvement. Besides, its fun.” Heuser believed that beauty would not only get the attention

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<sup>427</sup> Perry Barnes, 66.

of others, but it was beneficial for women as well. “Knowing that you are your most attractive will boost your confidence and your brain will work even better,” she wrote, followed by specific fashion tips. These included, “Keep clothes and jewelry non-distracting. Nix dangling earrings. Of course pins or badges that help explain you and yours are fine.”

Efforts to present a fashionable, lady-like image were all part of a greater endeavor to avoid bringing attention to one particular person or group, and place emphasis on the issues at hand. Most members of WIFE and other agricultural organizations portrayed themselves as typical Americans, and did not want to appear as radical outsiders, or as those going against society’s expectations. One very important aspect of not drawing attention to one’s self was a public declaration that they were not feminists. They used gender specific language in their official materials, referring to leaders as “spokeswomen,” and often discussed the advantages of organizing in an all-female group. In 1980, for example, a pamphlet designed to help women form new chapters described WIFE as “unique from most other farm women’s organizations in that it is not an auxiliary to any other group. Therefore it is free to make its own policies, set its own priorities, and achieve its goals unhampered by precedence,” making references to the fact that it was very much unlike traditional, male-dominated agricultural organization. And in 1982, just as members began to question the effectiveness of the motto “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,” a new slogan, “I’m a farm-her,” appeared sporadically on official materials. On the other hand, members did not deal with the Equal Rights Amendment in their newsletters or correspondence, and rarely

mentioned feminism or “women’s lib.” If they approached the topic at all, it was usually tongue-in-cheek.<sup>428</sup>

For example, in the June 1979 Nebraska WIFE newsletter, editors hoped to entertain members by reprinting an article that appeared in the 7 June issue of the *Louisville Messenger*, from Louisville, Nebraska. The article began with a description of the American farm woman, as portrayed in popular magazines. The iconic “original liberated Superwoman” was often pictured as “smiling Franny Farmer in her cute little head kerchief co-ordinated to match the color of her shiny tractor.” Then the author asked, “Ha! What do they know? Where do they show Franny Farmer getting a hernia trying to lift up the sections of the field cultivator?” Yet this hardworking woman had no need for feminism, and the author concluded, “just ask any farm woman who has tilled a field crosswise from the rows, however liberated she is, she will never burn her bra. I’m telling it like it is – the tractor-driving farm woman is a courageous person doing hard, dirty work with no glamour involved.” This was typical of members’ attitudes, particularly the idea that because farm women worked and shared in the family business they were already “liberated.”<sup>429</sup>

The members of WIFE were not alone and in general, Second Wave feminism found little public acceptance, or even acknowledgement, in the American countryside. In March 1972, a headline in the *New York Times* declared, “In Small Town, USA, Women’s Liberation is Either a Joke or a Bore.” In the article, journalist Judy Klemesrud visited the small town of Hope, Indiana, population 1,500, and found few women concerned with gender equality. Even the town’s most “liberated” woman, Betty Taylor, owner of the town’s

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<sup>428</sup> “Background Information on WIFE,” pamphlet, 1980, WIFE Records, UNL; Nebraska WIFE newsletter, April 1982, WIFE Records, UNL.

<sup>429</sup> Newsletter, Nebraska WIFE Chapter 1 (June 1979), WIFE Records, UNL.

only hardware store, asked, “What does burning your bra have to do with making things equal?” This from a woman who was the first in town to wear slacks to work, and who even set up a daycare in the back of her store for employees with young children. Another Hope resident, 59-year-old Marie Harker, attributed the lack of interest to the fact that most women in the area were born and raised on farms. They not only understood hard work and sacrifice, but rural women knew not to complain. Harker said, “I don’t think we feel the pressure [for equality] that some women do. But then again I’m not so sure women are held down as much as they pretend to be, either.” A year later, in May 1973, another article in the *New York Times* lauded farm women for taking on new roles as technology eased the burden of labor. The article declared that modern farm women had time to pursue an education, hobbies, travel, and off-farm work, yet “Feminists are scarce. Separate checking accounts are considered radical by some, and the feminist movement, abortion, and the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) have few sympathizers.”<sup>430</sup>

In September 1975, the editors of the *Farm Wife News* also wondered if Second Wave feminism had made any progress in rural America, and they asked women to write on their opinions of the ERA. By December, the editors found that even though most of the women writing in had “thoroughly researched the topic,” 87.5 percent opposed the Constitutional amendment. Most of these women, who had incorrect information on the purpose of the legislation, were concerned that the ERA would “further deteriorate the family unit.” Many believed that the ERA would require women to either work outside the home and provide fifty percent of the family’s income, or else require husbands to pay social

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<sup>430</sup> Judy Klemesrud, “In Small Town USA Women’s Liberation is Either a Joke or a Bore,” *New York Times* (22 March 1972), 54; “Down on the Farm, a Wife’s Life Isn’t the Drudgery It Used to Be,” *New York Times* (28 May 1973), 16.

security taxes for their wives. One woman even thought that the ERA would prohibit children from having their fathers' last names because "it would discriminate against the mother on account of her sex." Others, like farm wife Sue Sossman, believed that feminists were an elite group that did not understand the important responsibilities of farm women. Sossman wrote, "A tiny minority of dissatisfied, highly vocal, militant women insist that we are being exploited as a 'domestic drudge' and a 'pretty toy.' And they are determined to 'liberate' us – whether we want it or not!" Most of the women writing in, however, were like Mrs. Harry L. Watts of Girard, Kansas, who wrote that farm women had long been "liberated." Girard believed that she had an equal say in her home regarding major purchases and the farm operation, and quipped, "Equal rights! I have as many rights as my husband, and maybe more."<sup>431</sup>

Even among the 12.5% of women who favored the ERA, few did so as self-declared "feminists." Most, like Clarice Ogle of Independence, Oregon, hoped that the ERA would resolve the problems associated with inheritance tax laws. She wrote that the ERA would finally force the government to recognize the unpaid contributions of farm women to the family business, and stated, "After working for year with our mates to buy and maintain family farms – then on the husband's death to pay for it again through an inheritance tax - is a cruel and unjust practice. The ERA will end this." Others hoped the amendment would help their daughters become more involved in high school athletics, while a small group of women simply believed it prudent to include a clause in the Constitution guaranteeing equal rights to all Americans.<sup>432</sup>

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<sup>431</sup> "Most Women Don't Support ERA," *Farm Wife News* 5, no. 12 (December 1975), 22.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid.



Little changed over the next few years, and in 1977, when William Robbins, a *New York Times* reporter, covered the national conference of American Agri-Women in Green Bay, Wisconsin, he found that the women there were “fighting for their families and their farms... and not for their own rights as women.” Joan Adams, a cattle rancher from Oklahoma and national coordinator for American Agri-Women, told Robbins, “I’m no libber. The Equal Rights Amendment is their bag. Agriculture is mine.” Likewise, Nance Smiddle, a dairy farmer from Wisconsin, said, “I’ve got all the equality I can stand.” She explained to Robbins how she shared in the farm work and was an equal partner with her husband. Smiddle said, “There are two names on those notes at the bank.” Laura Heuser, who operated an orchard and nursery with her husband in Hartford, Michigan, made it clear to Robbins she consciously discounted feminism as a strategy to gain power in the agricultural community. Heuser, who described women as “a dominant power source in American Agriculture,” explained that the farm women’s movement was based on “total loving support of our husbands.” This did not mean that they believed women to be inferior, however, and she told Robbins, “We try to play [feminism] down, deliberately, but we’re militant. We’re activists.”<sup>433</sup>

If members of American Agri-women and WIFE deliberately “played down” feminism, it was part of an overall strategy to recreate popular images of rural people. Members of WIFE, in particular, wanted to show the public that they possessed a sophisticated understanding of agriculture, economics, and politics, and in every issue they addressed, they not only used facts, but also agrarian ideals that appealed to both urban and

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<sup>433</sup> William Robbins, “Women in Agriculture Fight for Their Families and Their Farms,” *New York Times* (14 November 1977), 55.

rural Americans. This was not an idea reserved for state and national leaders who dealt with high-ranking political figures, but membership in WIFE also provided women at the local levels with opportunities to learn new information and become involved with community issues. Though they initially wanted to tackle agricultural problems at the national level, the first members of WIFE quickly realized that their lobbying efforts could also promote change nearby. Members of WIFE attended county-level meetings for conservation and natural resources, development and planning, Extension, water boards. They also attended the meetings of various commodity organizations, including the Wheatgrowers, to learn more about trends in specific types of agriculture. Throughout the summer of 1978, several chapters throughout Nebraska chose to sponsor booths at the county fair not only to advertise WIFE, but also to educate and inform fairgoers. Bonnie Pittman of Dalton, Nebraska, drew up a map showing the locations of abandoned farmsteads in the surrounding areas. When women in North Platte, Nebraska heard about the use of dangerous pesticides in combating a recent grasshopper infestation, they repeatedly called the county supervisor in protest. Mabel Rasmussen, who reported the incident to the WIFE president, wrote, “The first contacts were very polite. By the next afternoon they were asking, ‘where are all you women calling from and what do you want?’” They told the girls that it would take a public hearing. The ladies said “fine, set it up in the region and notify us and any delay will be disastrous.”<sup>434</sup>

In an effort that combined national and local politics, members of WIFE took on the Department of Defense when, in 1978, it was announced that the federal government sought an 8,000 square mile area covering parts of Nebraska, Kansas, and Colorado to house 250 new MX missile sites. Under development since 1971, the MX missile was a 71-foot inter-

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<sup>434</sup> Marilyn Spiker to Nebraska WIFE membership, September 1978, WIFE Records, UNL.

continental ballistic missile that carried ten to twelve independent nuclear warheads. Dubbed the “Peacekeeper” in the early 1980s, the MX missile was on the cutting edge of defense technology, though storage and delivery of the missiles proved problematic. One proposed solution required extensive underground systems, with silos as far as 1,000 feet below the surface. If approved, however, the networks of underground silos, tunnels, and roads would effectively making those 8,000 square miles uninhabitable. This proposed area skirted the small towns of Gurly and Dalton, Nebraska and areas north of Sidney extending from Kimball to Ogallala and portions of Deuel, Keith, Perkins, Chase, Dundy, Lincoln, Hayes, and Hitchcock Counties. If the missiles were deployed, thousands would lose their farms, and small towns would wither. Members of WIFE, including Marian Lenzen, formed a tri-state coalition commonly known as No MX that sent representatives to public hearings and maintained a letter-writing campaign until 1983, when the Department of Defense abandoned the project and instead refitted fifty Minuteman missile silos in Wyoming.<sup>435</sup>

In doing this, members of WIFE united several unlikely partners, including the Farm Bureau, the National Farmers Organization, the Wheatgrowers, environmentalists, peace activists, and independent farmers and ranchers, who argued that MX missiles threatened world peace and the rights of those living in the West, and it was a drain on the federal budget. Yet above all else, members of WIFE participating in No MX evoked agrarian ideals, and attempted to convince the public that if the missiles were installed, it would not only destroy communities, but severely damage agricultural production, the very industry that gave the United States its strength. In a 1982 radio address over KRVN in Sidney, Marian Lenzen argued that the Department of Defense needed to reconsider its strategy. Rather than

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<sup>435</sup> Marian Lenzen, radio address transcript, KRVN, 17 May 1982, WIFE Records, UNL.

depend on missiles that made the Midwest a “bulls eye,” military planners needed to “appreciate the greatest of all resources,” the American farmer. She wrote, “This land is producing the most potent weapon would country has... the demand for food is growing, yet the Pentagon would pave over our land with roads and dig silos to plant MX missiles in our wheat fields.”<sup>436</sup>

The MX missile campaign, however, was exceptional, as was Marian Lenzen’s confidence as a writer, speaker, and activist. Many members of WIFE initially proved hesitant to speak in public, and for some women, the learning curve in becoming a well-informed, quick-thinking activist was tremendous. Yet as their main strategy relied on agrarian ideals and non-threatening, positive action, members of WIFE often found little resistance once the main purpose of their organization became clear to the community. An even greater hurdle than finding public acceptance, then, was simply helping women find the confidence to carryout the work. Stories of overcoming stage fright often appeared in newsletters. In a January 1978 letter to the general membership, for example, Mickey Spiker wrote, “I have heard from several others who have been speaking for WIFE on a local level. GREAT! Few of us have spoken to any group since show and tell time in kindergarten. Our knees shake, our mouths get dry, and we can’t even remember our own name, but we do it and will do it again to tell our story wherever we can.” In 1979, even Joan O’Connell, WIFE founder and Nebraska WIFE president emphasized her feelings of inadequacy when attending a National WIFE Steering Committee meeting. She described the meeting as a “cram course in Agriculture,” where she “kept wondering what a dummy like me was doing there.” O’Connell was not alone. She wrote, “There is so much to do and so much to learn

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<sup>436</sup> KRVN, 17 May 1982.

that it is mind boggling. One lady said that her head hurt from all the things that she was trying to learn and remember from the meeting.”<sup>437</sup>

Few women who joined had prior public speaking experience or had participated in political lobbying efforts, yet state and national leaders attempted to help women overcome their fears through gathering and sharing information. In many instances, members found themselves committed to speaking on issues about which they knew little. For example, in 1978 WIFE member Polly Woodham from South Carolina was listening to an agricultural radio program in her car when the commentator stated that if sugar beet growers received more federal supports they would make immense profits while making domestic sugar unaffordable to the average consumer. So enraged by this misinformation, Woodham pulled over, found a pay phone, and called the radio station to inform the commentator that his assessment was wrong. The commentator then invited Woodham to the station to debate him on his show, and Woodham agreed. Once she hung up, however, she panicked and called national president, Betty Majors, in Nebraska to tell her what happened. Majors quickly called another WIFE member who grew sugar beets to get in touch with Woodham and explain the situation. Armed with this information, Woodham appeared on the show the following week and was so successful that the host of the show invited her back for future debates.<sup>438</sup>

Most of the time, though, such learning was not so urgent, and in general, because members came from diverse agricultural backgrounds, leaders of WIFE asked women to become experts on what their families grew or the problems they faced. They selected

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<sup>437</sup> Marilyn Spiker to Nebraska WIFE membership, 1 January 1978, WIFE Records, UNL; Joan O’Connell to Nebraska WIFE membership, January 1979, WIFE Records, UNL.

<sup>438</sup> Joan O’Connell, oral history.

chairwomen to study specific subjects and report back to the organization for members to create and pass informed resolutions. By June 1978, Nebraska WIFE had twelve chairwomen for wheat, potatoes, dry edible beans, sugar beats, corn, feeder cattle, cow-calf operations, hogs, dairy, soybeans, milo, and water. Each chairwoman was required to send regular reports the state president, who then summarized their findings in a letter or newsletter for members. National and state leaders also encouraged local women to participate in study groups and promote discussion as a means to learn more about various issues. In 1979, for example, members studied the feasibility of a “gasohol” program as one solution to grain surpluses. They also studied legislation that affected agriculture, most often contextualizing the material by exploring the various facets and relationships between farmer purchasing power, commodity prices, and the ways in which the prices of agricultural products affects all parts of the U.S. and world economies. In doing this, members hoped to better communicate with primarily urban politicians and consumers who rarely understood the exact nature of agricultural issues, particularly cost of production.<sup>439</sup>

There is some evidence to suggest that this approach toward educating members was successful. A 1983 survey of WIFE members revealed that members were, in fact, highly active. Going to chapter meetings was the most common activity, with 98 percent reporting regular attendance, while another 90 percent participated in fundraising activities, and 92 percent lobbied by letter, telephone, or telegram. Most members participated in information gathering, with 79 percent regularly researching information to report to fellow members. When it came to actually stepping out in public, the majority of members actually

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<sup>439</sup> Marilyn Spiker to Nebraska WIFE membership, June 1978, WIFE Records, UNL; Perry-Barnes, 54.

participated, with 70 percent regularly presenting materials to the public, 51 percent lobbying in person at the county level, and 61 lobbying at the state level. Only 33 percent reported having participated in national lobbying efforts.<sup>440</sup>

Even though it appears that many WIFE members took seriously the organization's commitment to political action, by the early 1980s, many state and national leaders feared that stagnant membership numbers meant that WIFE had lost much of its early momentum. By 1983, WIFE had chapters in 23 states, primarily in the South and West, but the organization was plagued by membership loss. In 1978, WIFE boasted 3,000 members, but by 1982, this number fell to just 1,350 and was made more problematic by the fact that the organization appeared to be growing, with new chapters and state organizations being added each year. In many ways, with strong national leadership, WIFE matured very quickly into an organization with highly developed networks that enjoyed strong relationships with politicians at the state and national level. In 1979, national WIFE president Nita Gibson, a Texas cotton farmer, stated that her primary goal would be to enhance WIFE's visibility in Washington, D.C., and she focused considerable efforts on lobbying. Then, when another Texan, June Saylor, became president in 1981, she emphasized building relationships with other farm organizations. She worked closely with American Agri-Women to host another conference for farm women, and Saylor's efforts brought her much notoriety in the agricultural community. In 1983, she became chairman of the National Farm Forum, and was elected to the Board of Directors of the Agricultural Council of America.<sup>441</sup>

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<sup>440</sup> Perry-Barnes, 111.

<sup>441</sup> Perry-Barnes, 56.

It was not until Sydney Beck of Alabama became president in 1983, that the development of local membership once again became a priority. By then, however, many members and former members began to wonder if WIFE had strayed from its initial mission. When anthropologist Ann Perry-Barnes sought to understand membership loss within the organization, she surveyed members and former members as to the benefits and drawbacks of the organization. She found that while a few women indicated that off-farm work and family responsibilities sometimes played a role in leaving the group, most former members left because of something in “the membership experience itself.”<sup>442</sup> The primary complaint among members and former members was that the organization had lost its emphasis on grassroots activism, with many members expressing concerns that WIFE had become “part of the system.” Those surveyed overwhelmingly approved of state and national leaders, and in a typical response to questions regarding the effectiveness of leaders, one former member wrote, “The women who did appear nationally and at top state levels have been very commendable. Almost without exception they have handled themselves well and spoke intelligently to the issues.”<sup>443</sup>

At the same time, however, many members and former members believed that the emphasis on developing the national organization had taken away some of the group’s early excitement and grassroots identity. One member wrote, “WIFE used to be more spontaneous. Now it has become constrained by a growing body of policy. There are official stands on everything.” Another member experienced increasing frustration with the new emphasis on policy and procedure, and she wrote, “WIFE has fallen into the trap of the older generation –

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<sup>442</sup> Perry-Barnes, 4.

<sup>443</sup> Perry-Barnes, 99.



using the standard procedures – understanding and accepting the political procedure and maintaining an ironclad stance on goals such as parity, target price, loans, etc. In some ways, it seems WIFE has become the old, stable, unyielding organization.” Such comments were common in Perry-Barnes’ survey, and seemed to allude to the idea that women once again felt powerless in an organization they no longer controlled. As WIFE grew and matured, it seemed to become more like the male-dominated organizations that the founding members had chastised for being out of touch with local needs. One former member complained that state and national leaders no longer sought local input, while one current member lamented the loss of local responsibilities for lobbying and political action. She wrote, “Our state has a lobbyist now. At first we kept track of the bills and were more directly involved in the legislative process. Having a lobbyist may be more politically effective, but it has limited the role of the other members statewide.”<sup>444</sup>

In her survey, Perry-Barnes found that nearly all of the women who joined WIFE did so in order to “do something” about inflation, rising costs or production, and the political problems facing agriculture, just as the founding members had done. She considered a myriad of factors, including members’ ages, economic class, and education, but ultimately found that the two best predictors of sustained membership were a woman’s ability to believe that she could make a difference, and the degree of support she received from her husband and family. Those who remained members overcame their fears of public speaking and lack of knowledge on central issues. While one former member wrote, “I felt intimidated - felt I could never learn all that the other members knew or do the things they did,” a sustained member commented, “I convinced myself I could dig in and get busy. If others could do it, so

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<sup>444</sup> Perry-Barnes, 124-195.

could I. I had to build my own confidence.” Many of the former members reported feeling overwhelmed by the breadth of issues and responsibilities, and simply did not feel capable of changing the situation.<sup>445</sup>

Above all else, however, it was members’ abilities to balance their work in the organization with their duties at home, that determined who took on leadership positions and maintained their membership. Whereas 72 percent of present members surveyed stated that their husbands were supportive from the beginning, only 42 percent of former members could say the same. Only 6 percent of former members reported their husbands to have negative attitudes toward their involvement, though most husbands of former members tended to be indifferent, offering little direct support. Furthermore, former members tended to be more self-conscious about their membership, as typified by one woman who wrote, “I know there is talk about the amount of time I spend away from home and my family.” This was very different from the current members who wrote, “My husband and I have grown closer because he shares more time discussing the issues with me now.” These women highly valued their husbands’ support, particularly when these men were willing to help with domestic chores.<sup>446</sup>

Certainly, the importance of marital harmony and the support of husbands were already apparent to members of WIFE. National leaders attempted to include husbands when possible, and national and state conventions always included programs for men. As the women discussed policy, their husbands enjoyed a day out. At the 1983 Nebraska WIFE convention, for example, husbands “were given various activities to choose from,” including

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<sup>445</sup> Perry-Barnes, 126.

<sup>446</sup> Perry-Barnes, 100-101.

the “Men’s Tour” which featured a tour of a solar home, Old Fort Kearney, and Pioneer Village. Later that evening, WIFE members made a special point to recognize their husbands at the banquet. Such recognition was important, because many members of WIFE believed that they could not participate without the support of husbands. It was they, after all, who sacrificed tidy homes and warm meals so that their wives could address political issues. And, the women believed, it was the husbands who had to account for their outspoken wives to disapproving neighbors.<sup>447</sup>

Mickey Spiker recalled that her involvement in WIFE often took her away from home and her domestic duties. Before she joined WIFE, she said that if she had to leave home to run errands, she set the table and left notes indicating, “The salad’s in the icebox,” or “The meat’s in the oven.” After becoming involved, however, “the men were leaving notes on the table: ‘When you go, Mom, you better do something about this,’ and ‘Mom, on your way through town, could you pick up some more bologna? We are out.’” In their state newsletters, and in the national publication, WIFeline, women constantly thanked their families for their understanding and support. In January 1981, Nebraska WIFE president, Luella Stevens wrote a letter to the general membership in which she thanked all of the husbands who supported their wives’ political activities. She wrote, “We owe [our husbands] a debt of gratitude for supporting us literally, spiritually, and financially. Without these great guys and their sons, we would have no cause or inspiration for our efforts and endeavors, and without them, no food or fiber, for those little ones in our brag books, God Bless them all!”<sup>448</sup>

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<sup>447</sup> Nebraska WIFE newsletter, WIFE Records, UNL.

<sup>448</sup> Luella Stevens to members of Nebraska WIFE, January 1981, WIFE Records, UNL; Spiker oral history.

In her conclusion of her membership study, Perry-Barnes believed that building women's confidence was key to sustaining membership and suggested to national leaders that they carefully develop local programs for members, particularly in leadership training. She also believed that state and national leaders need to return some control to local groups by instituting "some means whereby members can voice discontent with the organization, officers, and perhaps fellow members as well." In many ways, these suggestions seem to imply that WIFE had, in fact, moved away from its initial grassroots emphasis. It is also important to note, however, that some of the most important factors, including member confidence and marital relationships, were well beyond the control of WIFE leaders.<sup>449</sup>

Though leaders did attempt to foster growth at the local levels, the worsening economic conditions also helped to revive grassroots interest as more and more families sought immediate help. As they entered the Farm Crisis of the 1980s, many members of WIFE experienced the same difficulties as farm families across the country, but the leaders appeared confident that they could help those in need. In the fall of 1984, Nebraska WIFE sponsored a farm crisis hotline, and took 108 calls in the first month alone. Most of the callers were male, with an average age of 55, who sought financial and legal advice, which is significant considering these men turned to a women's organization for help. Furthermore, WIFE already had the social and political networks necessary to deal with state and national leaders. Clearly, the grassroots efforts on the part of farm women to organize in the 1970s, not just in WIFE, but also in American Agri-Women, state organizations, and local groups, signified an important significant change in the way farm women viewed activism and the roles they could play in agricultural politics. Even before the Farm Crisis compelled women

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<sup>449</sup> Perry-Barnes, 140-145

to organize and lead new groups, some farm women of the 1970s found a new power in forming independent, all-female organizations. In 1983, one member of WIFE best summed up this transformation when she wrote,

I spent more years and hours than I care to tabulate or remember working in a general agricultural organization. All that women are allowed to do in these groups are prepare coffee, bake cookies, make phone calls to remind members of the meeting, or at best educate younger members. No true leadership positions are available... Any innovative ideas women have are frequently pirated away by the men and presented to the group as his idea. It happened to me frequently. WIFE gave me the opportunity to either be among the necessary and vital workers or take the initiative and step out into a leadership role.

One could argue that women of this period made little progress because even into the 1980s, few held leadership positions in major farm organizations. While this may be true, by the 1980s, the rhetoric of farm women's organizations began to change. Since their founding in 1976, WIFE newsletters, pamphlets, and correspondence were littered with apologies to members for being behind and not getting the information out on time, or comments about nervousness and a lack of confidence to address issues. By 1985, however, this rhetoric had vanished and was replaced by an urgent call to action.<sup>450</sup>

The establishment of organizations like WIFE represented an important shift in rural activism, as many struggling farmers and their families decided that established farm organizations had little use for local input and grassroots movements. In 1976, the founding members of WIFE outlined five primary goals: to obtain 100 percent of parity from the

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<sup>450</sup> Perry-Barnes, 98. June 1985; "Farm Crisis Response, Semi-Annual Report to the Department of Agriculture for Crisis Hotline, October 1, 1984 and April 1, 1985," April 1985, WIFE Records, UNL. Between October and April, the WIFE hotline took a total of 634 calls from Nebraska, 85 from out of state, and 8 from unknown locations. 546 males and 181 females called, though many contacted the crisis hotline as couples. 80 percent of the callers were between the ages of 40 and 55 years old. Averaging 25 calls per day, each call took about twenty minutes, though could last as long as 8 to 10 hours if the situation was urgent. Information about the hotline was featured in the *Washington Post* and the *London Tribune*, as well as local newspapers around the state. It was also featured on the program, Good Morning America.

market place, not government supports; to raise standards of living for farm families; to promote understanding among Americans as to the agriculture's importance to the nation's welfare and prosperity; to work with consumer organizations in promoting sound economic policies; to work extensively through the educational system, including changing classroom curriculum; and to unite agricultural organizations and political bodies in working toward "prosperity in the field of agriculture." While they did not achieve parity or immediately raise standards of living, they did accomplish one very important goal: setting a precedent for women as leaders in agricultural politics and activism. In the early 1980s, between 100 and 150 new agricultural organizations appeared to address the worsening crisis. And in many cases, women played important roles at the local levels. WIFE, and the dozens of women's organizations to emerge in the 1980s, had already established organizational models wherein women could take on important public roles in dealing with politicians, policy makers, and the media, without the help or guidance of men.<sup>451</sup>

The women of WIFE, though, did not venture into new territory without facing self-doubt, or without overcoming old ideas about women's duties to the home and family. They were successful because they carefully downplayed the rhetoric of Second Wave feminism and individual empowerment, instead choosing to emphasize a non-threatening agrarian ideal that appealed to urban and rural Americans. They based their activism on the idea of saving the "family farm" and justified their participation by declaring an equal stake in the farming enterprise. This was best exemplified in 1982 when members of Nebraska WIFE lead lobbying efforts for Initiative S300, which banned corporate ownership of farming operations

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<sup>451</sup> William C. Pratt, "Using History to Make History? Progressive Farm Organizing During the Farm Revolt of the 1980s," *Annals of Iowa* 55 (Winter 1996), 25.

in Nebraska. The law still allowed families to incorporate holdings, but prohibited any “corporation or syndicate” from acquiring any interest or “title to real estate used for farming or ranching in this state, or engage in farming or ranching.” Initiative S300 appeared on the ballot through the petition process and was approved in the general election of November 1982 as an addition to the Nebraska Constitution.

In September 1982, Nebraska WIFE president Luella Stevens rallied members to work on gaining voter support in their local communities, to write their state representatives, and to inform the public about the necessity of Initiative S300. She wrote, “this may be a last ditch effort to save our state from being managed by farm managers and maneuvered by farm corporations. I can see no good results for the state of Nebraska, whose major source of income is derived from farming and ranching. I also hate sand in my coffee, especially when it may blow from land ignored and unconserved, which should often remain undisturbed feed sources for livestock!” With these words, she implied that the members of WIFE, and farmers in general, possessed special knowledge and skills rarely valued by urban Americans. They were stewards of the land, of resources, or food, and ultimately, democracy. As women, they worked not for individual achievement or notoriety, but for one simple goal, to save the family farm and ensure the preservation of a fundamental American institution.<sup>452</sup>

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<sup>452</sup> Luella Stevens, “President’s Page,” Nebraska WIFE newsletter (September-October 1982), WIFE Records, UNL.

## Epilogue

Throughout the twentieth century, Midwestern farm women recognized that they were a shrinking minority in an increasingly urban, industrial United States, and this dissertation has explored one of the ways in which some farm women coped with that reality: by joining organizations. Certainly, it should be acknowledged that this study has only considered those women who chose to, or fought to, remain in agriculture. The records, oral histories, and artifacts used here did not portray the experiences of countless families displaced by economic and technological changes throughout the twentieth century, or those who chose to leave farming for more lucrative urban occupations. This study did not consider those women who did not take action, or who did not join organizations because of marginal farming conditions, oppressive circumstances in the home, isolated living conditions, or work demands both on and off the farm. Women who joined agricultural groups, and especially those who became active members or leaders, were often those who came from relatively stable economic circumstances, those who had the support of their families and their husbands, and those who simply believed they had something to contribute through their organizational activity. This begs the question, then, as to how an understanding of women's organizations can contribute to our understanding of rural America these organizations represented only a handful of farm women.

The women who joined various groups sought to address the material needs of farm families, change marketing practices, persuade consumers to buy certain products, and influence politicians to pass legislation. Whether they joined homemakers clubs, the National Farmers Organization (NFO), the Iowa Porkettes, or Women in Farm Economics (WIFE),



the women in this study, for the most part, utilized ideals shaped by romantic agrarianism to uphold the family farm as the best and most efficient model of agricultural production. The preceding chapters have illustrated that rather than finding themselves marginalized from agricultural production in the second half of the twentieth century, women who joined organizations wanted to adapt to changing conditions and to embrace new technologies on their own terms. Such findings are significant because in the early twenty-first century, women actually own much of the farmland in Midwestern states, and increasingly, it is women who decide how the land is used, who farms it, and the commodities produced. By 2002, for example, women owned or co-owned 47 percent of all Iowa farmland, and 54 percent of all leased Iowa farmland. Therefore, understanding women's connections to the land, their orientation to the marketplace, and their strategies in dealing with the organizational and political aspects of agriculture has become more and more important.<sup>453</sup>

That women have a growing influence on agricultural policies and practices has not escaped the notice of researchers and policy makers. In 2007, the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development released a study titled "Women, Land, and Legacy: Results from the Listening Sessions," to determine the needs, aspirations, and perceptions of 806 Iowa farm women from twenty-two of Iowa's ninety-nine counties. Several organizations and government agencies collaborated in the study including the USDA State Outreach Committee, the USDA Farm Service Agency, the Women, Food, and Agriculture Network, the Ecumenical Ministries of Iowa, and the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, each representing diverse interests in rural and agricultural policies. Between 2004 and 2006,

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<sup>453</sup> Corry Bregendahl, Carol R. Smith, Tanya Meyer-Dideriksen, Beth Grabau, and Cornelia Flora, "Women, Land, and Legacy: Results from the Listening Sessions," (Ames, IA: North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, 2007), 11.

researchers invited women landowners, both owner-operators and those who leased their land, to talk about their experiences and expectations. Overall, the study found that, like the women studied in this dissertation, women today continue to operate within “gendered locations,” shaped by beliefs about traditional gender roles. These locations situate them outside of the dominant discourse in agriculture, but also foster unique, decidedly female identities and relationships with the land. In expressing their own ideas about land use and ownership, the women rejected “industrialized agriculture,” and favored small, family owned and operated farms. In doing this, the women who participated associated personal independence with community independence, as opposed to paternalistic notions of “individualism.” They wanted freedom from “outside control,” but characterized “outside control” as coming from corporate and political entities seeking to control land and resources. The women fully integrated family and traditional ideals into their perceptions of independence, as they defined themselves as the “locus of connections to family, community, and nature.” This supports the theoretical framework of “relational feminism,” used throughout the dissertation, which emphasizes women’s relationships to the land and their connection to agriculture, as opposed to women’s connection to a gendered identity. In the listening sessions, women discussed deriving strength and health from the land, and when they discussed their relationships with the land, women were twice as likely to “report having assets rather than needs.” This stood in stark contrast to farm service providers’ perceptions of women, who typically viewed female landowners as emotional and confused. Farm service providers generally perceived women as “needing rather than having,” strong farming

identities, connections to the community, material resources, and knowledge of agriculture.<sup>454</sup>

The women who participated in the listening sessions clearly defined a vision for American agriculture that differed from current trends toward intensive practices, rising land prices, corporate farming, and absentee landownership. While it may at first appear that such concerns should transcend gendered boundaries, the study noted that women think about such problems differently. They think “temporally,” taking into account the past and the future, incorporating their needs “here and now,” with their experiences and their desires for the future. As they described their relationships with the land, women tended to integrate spirituality, natural beauty, and physical and emotional health with economic benefits and physical ownership. They not only wanted profitable farms, but sustainable operations to support their family over several generations. Such “gendered thinking and planning patterns,” proved to be complex and perhaps beyond the current scope and understanding of government agencies and programs. The answer then, is for women to reshape current agricultural policy and to take action in implementing their ideas.<sup>455</sup>

While the women shared a general consensus that knowledge was power, they still found limited opportunities to exercise such power through political or organizational venues. This reveals the necessity of reshaping presentation formats, of reworking modes of information gathering, and of restructuring organizations to meet the needs of women. In some ways, this dissertation contributes to this process by demonstrating the variety of strategies, both successes and failures, that farm women have employed over time. In general,

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<sup>454</sup> Ibid., 3, 9, 30-31.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid, 32.

the organizations studied in this dissertation show that women gained greater confidence and experience when working with other women in group activities that are geared toward community building. Even if their organization did not have a specific women's component, in the case of the NFO, they still highly valued friendships and shared experiences.

From the listening sessions, it appears that very little has changed in terms of women's preferences for working within supportive, welcoming communities with like-minded women. Of the women who participated in the listening sessions, 410 completed evaluations following their session in which they described their preferences for receiving information and organizing female landowners. They clearly desired more information and indicated that they would participate in informational sessions on a variety of issues, ranging from tax codes, crop management, animal husbandry, leasing options for farmland, marketing, financial planning, conservation, health insurance, eminent domain, and technology. Yet the women also defined the ways in which they wanted to receive the information. They did not want to form a particular organization, but they wanted to learn about issues in the presence of women, from other women. During their listening sessions, several mentioned feeling uncomfortable and out of place at large meetings run by men, where they hesitated to ask questions or become involved in discussions. Instead, women desired small, women-only groups, believing that this would create a "supportive atmosphere," in which they could seek out mentors and friends. In order to accommodate their personal and family responsibilities, they desired to meet in neutral, peaceful settings where childcare would be provided, and at times compatible with their work schedules. Finally, because many women rely on story-telling techniques to understand and process

information, they wanted informational sessions to be discussion-based with interactive activities.<sup>456</sup>

The story of twentieth-century agriculture is one of rapid change, displacement, and depopulation. Like several recent scholars, the authors of “Women, Land, and Legacy,” suggested that should women land owners decide to implement their ideas and attempt to carry out their vision, the story of the twenty-first century could be the “feminization” of agriculture. How this will play out is uncertain, especially in the rapidly changing global economy, and this brief epilogue will not even attempt to predict whether such changes would actually bring about greater prosperity or the revitalization of rural communities. That is not the job of the historian. Yet this dissertation illustrates that over the past fifty years, many farm women have organized on their own terms in order to adapt to changing conditions. In order to do this, they redefined gendered locations while upholding traditional gender roles and the family farm ideal. This dissertation began with questions about why, in the early twenty-first century, women are longer satisfied with the concept of “mutuality,” which depends on separate but equally important gender-defined tasks. The answer is this: the framework of mutuality implies nothing about legal ownership, access to profits, or entitlement to access distinctly male spaces. The women who participated in the listening sessions recognized that they needed to seek legal, economic, and social equality in order to move forward as women holding legal title to land and resources, a strategy that makes sense in modern America. As farmers and landowners, however, they continue to express gendered identities and to develop a female approach toward acquiring knowledge and skills. They are not necessarily attempting to integrate themselves into the dominant agricultural discourse,

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<sup>456</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

but women recognize that in order to secure control over the resources and capital to which they increasingly hold title, they need to rethink their approach, just as women in the past adapted to their own circumstances.

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Jenny Barker-Devine was born in Omaha, Nebraska on November 21, 1977, and raised in Council Bluffs, Iowa. Though she grew up in town, she was inspired by her great-grandmother, Jayne O'Dell Peniston, who grew up on a farm in northwest Missouri, and left farming for good when she married in 1923.

In 2000, Barker-Devine graduated from the University of Central Missouri with a BA in history and international studies. She earned an MA in history from Iowa State University in 2003, and a PhD in Agricultural History and Rural Studies from Iowa State University in 2008. She is the author of "Mightier Than Missiles: The Rhetoric of Civil Defense for American Farm Families, 1950-1970," in the Fall 2006 issue of *Agricultural History*, as well as "Quite a Ripple But No Revolution": The Changing Roles of Women in the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation," in the Winter 2005 issue of the *Annals of Iowa*.